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By JACKSON COLE

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TEXAS RANGERS

VOLUME 30, NUMBER 1 A THRILLING PUBLICATION MARCH, 1948

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When crafty schemers stir up strife in the Mocha oilfields, Jim Hatfield rides into the fray with roaring six-guns primed for action! Follow the Lone Wolf Ranger as he moves lightning-fast in a battle to stave off an evil storm of gunsmoke! 13

NOVELET

THE BLIZZARD AND THE BANKER.....*by Joseph Chadwick* 70
When Old Man Winter decides to get tough in the Dakotas he bars no holds, as banker John Loring soon discovers when the Big Blow hits New Prospect!

SHORT STORIES

GUN TRAIL.....*by Tom Parsons* 67
Ranger Matt Lawrence finds you can't tell how a horse thief's mind will work

BROTHER'S KEEPER.....*by Allan K. Echols* 86
Law is one thing and justice another, but Sheriff Babson puts them together

DOC SWAP'S VACATION VENTURE.....*by Ben Frank* 93
The tradin' hombre's sure keepin' an eye on Sheriff MacLoyd's camping outfit

AND

THE FRONTIER POST.....*by Captain Starr* 6
A friendly get-together confab for readers, plus announcements and letters

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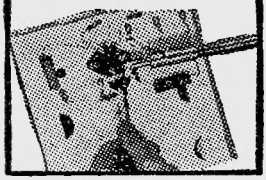

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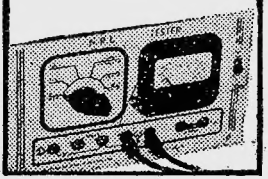

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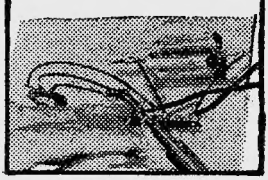

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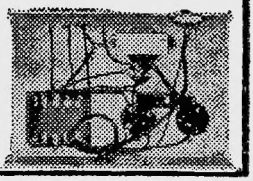

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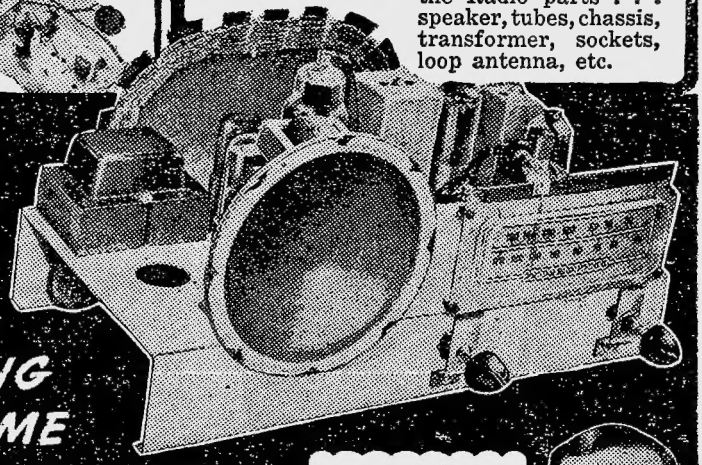

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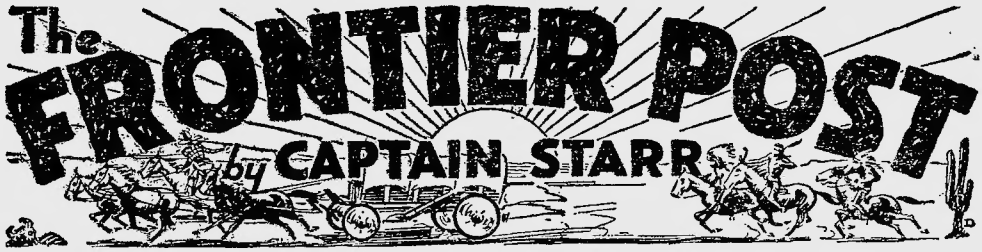

HIYA, gals and galluses! It's a long pasear we're making this time, from Texas to the far parts of western Canada. Our looksee deals with Vancouver Island, that big hunk of forest wilderness separated from the British Columbia mainland by bays and straits that are part of the Inland Passage to Alaska.

Big John and I, we saw that country together, aboard his bucking bronco, which is a wartime jeep made over into a camp car. It took us places that would have been tough travel even for a man in saddle.

Big John is an old *amigo* of mine, and about the best trail *compañero* any man could hope for. The 250 pounds of him stands six feet two in his Number 14 socks and he's full of chuckles that make a good time out of any hardship. I never did see him cloud up and get mad at any man—only once. That time, well, I'll tell you about it later.

The Mechanical Cayuse

We rolled aboard a ferry steamer at Port Angeles, Washington, in that mechanical cayuse of his. It attracted plenty of curiosity, with a boat on top and grub box cinched on the hood. The lid to that grub box made a table, when removed and the legs screwed on. The inside made up into two snug bunks at night, with a screened window beside each, which let in fresh air but kept out no-see-um flies. We could turn off the road anywhere and make camp pronto, often doing so in a drizzling north country rain, as the boat on top sheltered the open air chuckhouse front end like a roof.

You feel the roll of the deep blue Pacific in that hour and a half passage across Straits of Juan de Fuca to Victoria. The ship docks in a stone-walled basin that gives a grand view of the old government buildings, which are ivy-covered greystone castles with copper-roofed towers and turrets.

Ashore, on the broad landing ramp, blue-coated customs and immigration inspectors give visitors their first greeting. This is the friendliest frontier in the world, along with our Texas-Mexico Rio border. Seems like the inspectors have time for a pleasant word or two with everybody. They were plum admireful of Big John's Wander Wagon, and after a question or two waved us a "cheerio" on our way.

Built to Endure

Downtown Victoria looks as though it has stood there forever, and intends to continue doing so till the end of time. Dominion buildings are like the Canadian character—built to withstand and endure.

But soon Big John and I were past all that, up the long highway, through wooded glens, over rocky headlands that looked out on island-dotted Georgia Strait, along wide beaches where the sunny, clean tidewater lapped.

The towns we passed were small—Duncan, Ladysmith, Nanaimo, Qualicum Beach, Union Bay, Comox. Courtenay, Oyster River and finally after 200 miles the pavement ends at Campbell River.

We night-camped on a sand spit by the famous Tyee Club, where sportsmen come from all over the world when the big salmon run is on.

Big John lifted down the boat that evening. He handled the 110 pounds over his head easier than I can swing a 40-pound saddle onto a horse. A pistol shot offshore rowboats trolled slowly over the famous fishing grounds, 50 or more of them. We got among 'em, me at the oars, Big John plunked in the sternsheets gripping a rod hopefully, trolling a red-and-white salmon plug at the end of 60 feet of line.

At the clubhouse porch, on the beach, was a white yard-square scoreboard. On it were big black figures. They changed often as a lucky boat put in to the weighing station with a catch—38, 43, then 47. They don't

(Continued on page 8)

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(Continued from page 6)

bother to weigh a salmon under 30 pounds at the Tyee Club.

A Terrific Strike

Along about dusk, when it was getting hard to read the latest figures, Big John's rod suddenly swished down and curved to the force of a terrific strike. He let out a terrific whoop. I swung that boat to follow his fish, to play it away from the other boats.

Forgetting his 250 pounds and the power behind it, Big John clamped hard onto his star drag reel. Too hard. Our boat skittered after that fish so fast it left a rippling wake. Up it came from the bottom, leaping like a trout. We got a good look at it then. That chrome-plated walloper was as big around as a man, nearly as long. It leaped so close alongside that the huge splash wetted us with spray. Old hands at the salmon game told us later that it would have hefted 60 pounds or better—maybe a season's record for size.

But right soon after that leap, the line went slack. Big John gave a sickish groan and reeled in. It was gone.

But he was himself again when we beached the boat at dark, laughing off his disappointment. Next morning we broke camp and took off into the back country wilderness.

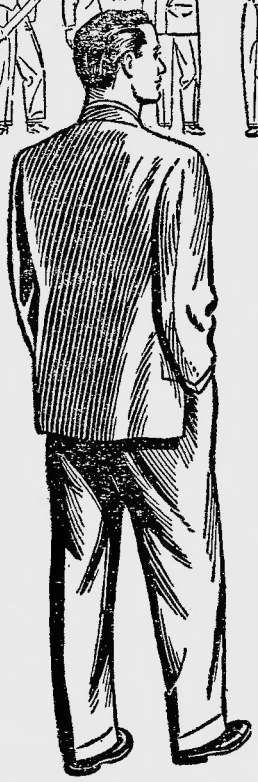
Land of the Spoilers

Over rough gravel we went for miles through a blackened stumpland, strewn with enough charred, rotting logs to rebuild the cities of two continents. For this was the land of the spoilers, in the days when waste and ruin was the rule. When folks in the Northwest had, or thought they had, enough timber to supply all mankind till Gabriel's trumpet sounded.

We were in green wilderness again when we reached upper Campbell Lake and the jeep bucked down a steep skid road to the water's edge.

Yonder, beyond the head of the lake, loomed the snow-capped backbone of Vancouver Island. We made camp where an icy spring gushed out of a mountainside. Up along the shore a black bear stood on a log, clawing huckleberries out of a tall thicket. A

(Continued on page 10)



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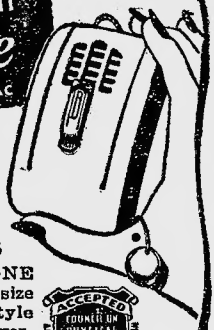

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(Continued from page 8)

trout leaped, leaving a growing ring where the calm lake mirrored the tall firs.

Big John heaved down that boat again, like it was a chip of wood. We feasted that night under the northland stars on fresh-caught trout, sizzled in bacon. Up at pink dawn we outboarded up the 7-mile-long lake to the mouth of a river where the granite peaks of the Strathcona peaks closed in. We were in the heart of the roadless wilderness, beyond the snow fields of Forbidden Plateau, where you meet up oftener with elk or caribou or moose than with a human critter.

We were three days back yonder, where Nature's domain is marred only by the tracks of an old logging railroad. We found other lakes and rivers where the beaver swam unafraid and a great golden eagle kept track of us from a high-up deadtop.

We heard and saw blue grouse, tame as barnyard chickens, and once approached in rope throw of a black bear that wrinkled up his snout and made a face at us.

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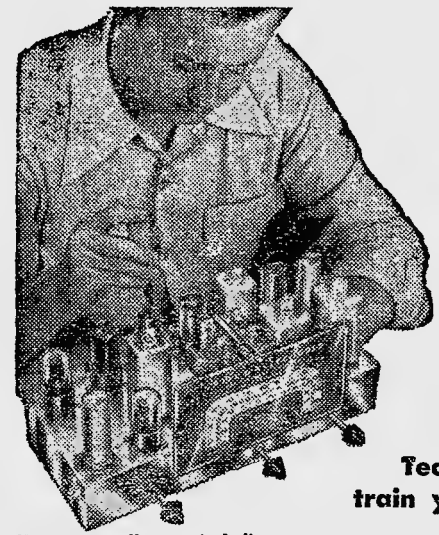
Our guns, on account of border restrictions, we'd stashed down on the American side. So we didn't bother our forest neighbors and they didn't mind us. But we made our $7 non-resident fishing licenses count. Big John got pictures of cutthroat trout striking my fly within six feet of his camera lens. We lived hard all day and plum died every night, come the first evening star. We packed away a lifetime of memories we'll cherish always.

Other such days and nights followed, there and elsewhere, till a cold drizzle chilled our desert country blood and one day we were back in Victoria, meandering through Hudson's Bay Company store, buying gifts to take to folks back home. And then Port Angeles again. After we passed U.S.A. customs and immigration inspection, we headed out along the west side of Olympic Peninsula, where the State of Washington is rebuilding a crooked, rough old highway through a refreshing unspoiled land of giant fir and spruce that grow down to the tide beaches.

It is a land of many rivers, alive in season with sea-run trout and salmon. We camped on the Hoh, milky-blue from its glacier

(Continued on page 107)



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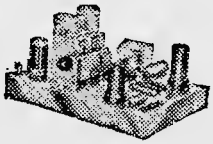

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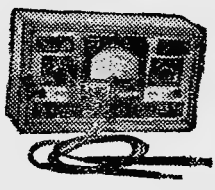

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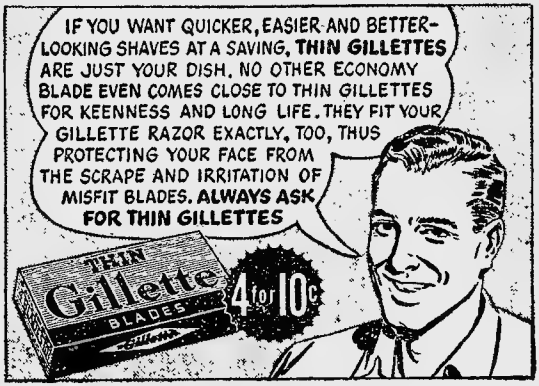
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THE BLACK GOLD SECRET

CHAPTER I: *By a Dead Hand*

MANY LONG miles and many strange things lie between Texas and New York City. But there is no distance so great that it cannot be bridged by the web of circumstance. West and East may be far apart as the poles, but common interest can bind them closely together.

It was such an interest that made possible a communion between Hamilton Colyer, banker, patron of the arts, collector of rare books, and the much

A JIM HATFIELD NOVEL BY **JACKSON COLE**

younger man with the healthy outdoor look about him who sat across the mahogany table from the white-haired literateur in his big cool house on upper Riverside Drive.

The walls of the great room were lined with book shelves extending from the floor to the beamed ceiling. And every shelf was filled with books, many of them of priceless value. Hamilton Colyer's eyes rested lovingly upon them as he talked. His library was the banker's hobby, and when he could find an appreciative guest, he was happy.

The younger man appeared appreciative, and his comments lacked neither intelligence nor knowledge. Colyer's wrinkled face wore a pleased expression and his eyes were animated as he talked. He held in his hand a massive volume bound in leather, strapped with brass. Such a book as monks in old monasteries labored over with loving care. The lines of writing were even and black, the capitals brilliantly colored. The ancient parchment paper crackled under his touch as he turned the pages.

"It was sent me by my friend in Texas, a talented scholar, who is now dead," he remarked.

He studied the book for a moment, raised his eyes to his companion.

"You read Spanish, do you not?" he asked.

"Rather well, suh," the other man returned.

"I read it, indifferently well," Colyer said. "But this has me considerably puzzled. I can't make much of it."

He passed the book to the younger man, who bent his brows over it.

"Written in Old Spanish," he said. "Sort of archaic. Corresponds to modern Spanish about like the English of Chaucer corresponds to present day English. Reckon that's why yuh been havin' trouble with it."

HAMILTON COLYER nodded. "It would be easy for your father, God rest him," he replied. "He was an excellent Spanish scholar. As far as I have been able to make out, the book is a compilation of correspondence between the Brothers of the Mission San Antonio de Valero and other Franciscan Brothers in Havana and other places. Most of the matter is of little interest, but I happened upon one excerpt that I thought highly unusual, and noteworthy in that it emphasizes the prevalent superstition of the times. Here, let me find it for you."

He took the book, turned the crackling pages, paused, and handed it back to his young companion.

"Read it aloud," he directed.

The other read, slowly and haltingly, spelling out the unfamiliar script:

"To Father Trajan of the Chapel of St. Paul, Habana:

"Friend and Brother, greetings!

"Verily, my friend, this country in which I find myself is a wondrous land of strange and terrible happenings. Brother, I have looked upon Hell and its terrors, and have struggled with the Foul Fiend, and live to tell the story! This statement may sound wild, and cause you to discredit my sanity, but verily it is the truth. God be my witness!

"While I journeyed from the Great River to the Mission San Antonio de Valero, there arose a terrible storm. The ancient trail runs close by a lonely mountain under which are many caves. I sought shelter in one of these caves. It was very dark within, but I fashioned me a torch and entered, lighting my way into the depths.

"It was an awesome place, infested by a foul and mephitic odor. But, commending my soul to the blessed Saint Anthony, I persisted until I was some distance into the darkness. Suddenly I saw at my very feet a black and sullen pool reflecting the light of my torch. I was athirst, and knelt to drink, holding forth my torch to guide me.

"And then, Brother, while on my knees in the attitude of prayer, the Evil One struck with blinding lightnings and awesome thunders. I was hurled to the ground; my brows and my lashes were burned away; my robe burst into flames. But mightily I struggled, tore myself from his embrace and rushed forth. The driving rain laved my hurts and extinguished the flame that charred my robe. I escaped

TO HEAD OFF AN EVIL STORM OF GUNSMOKE!

with my life, but the scars of the encounter I will bear to my grave. Verily, the poet spake truth when he wrote:

" 'There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy!'

"Olivares, of the Mission San Antonio de Valero, New Spain."

"Did you ever read such balderdash!" snorted Hamilton Colyer. " 'Struggled with the Foul Fiend!' Bah!"

Finally Colyer dimmed the lights, called to a servant to bring them a nightcap. They drank, and ascended the stairs to their respective sleeping chambers. The dimly lighted library was left to silence, and the ghosts that lived in the ancient books.

Hours afterward, when the mansion was dark and still, a figure stole into the library, passed along the shelves of books and slipped out as noiselessly as it had entered.

JIM HATFIELD

The younger man shot his elderly companion a swift glance. His eyes glowed under his brows.

"May have been speakin' in imagery—they did a lot of that in those days," he remarked in casual tones.

"Rank superstition," Colyer grunted disdainfully. "Fitting to the times that spawned it."

The other man said no more, but continued to thumb the ancient volume. Finally, however, he laid it aside. Colyer returned it to its place on a shelf, and the conversation turned to generalities.

Several days later, after his guest had departed, Hamilton Colyer rummaged long and fruitlessly through his collection. He scolded his servants for carelessness, racked his own memory against a possible mislaying. But, search as he would, he could not find his rare volume, bound in brass, of the correspondence of the Brothers of Saint Francis of Assisi.

THE southwestern part of McMullen County, Texas, is rough and rugged. There are many hills, locally dignified as mountains. The most noted is San Cajo

Mountain, said to mean in the beginning, when the *San* was *Sin*, "Without Coffin," referring to the numberless unburied bones lying on and around San Cajo.

Between San Cajo and the Rio Grande stretches seventy miles of parched and desolate desert. Laredo, on the Rio Grande, lies slightly west of south from San Cajo. San Antonio is almost due north, and more than a hundred miles distant.

In the caves under San Cajo once lived bands of outlaws who preyed on traffic passing over the "lower trail" between Laredo and San Antonio.

San Cajo is a landmark, and about it cluster legends of buried treasure, tales of bloody deeds, and facts enough of grim tragedy.

Across the desert runs a trail that cuts south of San Cajo and about midway between the mountain and Laredo. Weary with the miles of arid desert, it climbs the low hills not far from the canyoned Neuces in a series of tired windings.

Beyond the hills lies rangeland, wild brush country, but well grown with wheat grasses, prickly pear from which a cow could "chaw" enough water to keep going in time of drought, and the curly mesquite filled with the distilled spirit of the vast sun and the sweet rain of the dry country. Hard range to comb for strays, for one can hear *ladino* cows popping the brush half a mile away though there isn't an animal in sight.

Time was when the whole great stretch of country beyond the hills, and on to Laredo on the south, was peopled only by cowmen, and those who preyed upon them. But it was different that star burned night when Jim Hatfield, he whom a stern old Lieutenant of Rangers named the Lone Wolf, rode up the winding trail to the hill crest banking black and mysterious against the sky. Hatfield knew that the ominous red glare that dimmed the stars and drenched the scattered clouds with blood could never come from burning barn or ranchhouse. A dozen *casas,* blazing fiercely, could not fling such a flood of stormy light boiling upward beyond the hill crest.

"Feller, we can't be far from Mocho, the oil town we're heading for," he told his horse. "They shore must be having some celebration over there, to light up a bonfire like that. June along, horse, and let's see what's going on."

Goldy, his great sorrel, quickened his pace. Another five minutes and they topped the crest. Hatfield pulled his mount to a halt and whistled beneath his breath.

The trail dropped steeply down the opposite side of the ridge to the level ground perhaps a mile distant. Another mile farther on across the level, was a wide spangling of lights that marked the site of the oil town. Spreading out on all sides from the town was a veritable forest of tall derricks. Their gaunt skeleton-shapes were outlined in the fierce glare from a mighty pillar of roaring flame that soared high into the air. It was crested by a vast plume of tossing, rolling smoke.

"An oil well on fire!" Hatfield muttered. "No wonder the sky was lit up. Now how did that thing catch, I wonder? That's mighty dangerous. The whole field might go up in smoke. Lucky there isn't any wind to speak of. Sift sand, jughead! Let's get a closer look."

Goldy started down the trail, which was flanked on either side by a stiff bristle of tall growth. He had progressed but a few hundred yards, however, when Hatfield again pulled him to a halt. From down the slope came a stutter of shots. And in the shadowy "canyon" that the growth formed of the trail, the Lone Wolf could see spurting red flashes rolling swiftly in his direction. From farther down the trail were other flashes, proceeding upward at a slower rate. To his ears came a distant drumming of hoofs.

"Now what?" he exclaimed. His black brows drew together as the beat of horses' irons grew louder by the minute. The crackle of gunfire continued for a space, then died out. The clicking of hoofs was now more distinct.

"That bunch is coming fast," Hatfield told his horse. "Looks like they're having a mite of arg'fyin' with somebody farther back, too. I've a notion it isn't exactly good business to show up in front of them all of a sudden. In the clear, feller, and let 'em pass!"

HE BACKED the protesting horse into the thorny growth until he was out of sight from the trail. Another moment and a confused dancing of shadows

Sitting his great golden horse on the crest of the hill, Hatfield saw two Cross C punchers whirl out of their saddles (CHAPTER IX)

appeared some distance down the slope. A more open space, where the glare of the burning oil well threw a red blotch across the trail, revealed some seven or eight horsemen riding at a fast pace, bending low in their saddles, glancing over their shoulders from time to time.

The light was too dim and the distance too great for their faces to be other than white blurs. Then the shadows swallowed them again. A moment more and they swept past Hatfield's place of concealment, saddle leather popping, bridle irons jingling, horses' irons beating the hard surface of the trail.

Peering through the fringe of growth, Hatfield watched them skalleyhoot up the trail, outline for an instant against the skyline and vanish over the crest.

"Shore had business some place else," he mused, shifting his gaze to the canyon of the trail below.

All was silent down there, except for the continued rumble of the burning well. Nor could he perceive any movement.

"The gents behind were on foot," he decided. "Reckon they gave it up and went back where they came from. Now what is this all about, I wonder?"

Goldy couldn't answer the question, so Hatfield shoved him onto the trail again and rode slowly down the sag. He was almost to the level ground where a fork of the trail turned south along the base of the hills, when a voice spoke sharply from the shadows that flanked the trail:

"All right, cowboy, that'll be far enough!"

The ominous click of a rifle hammer drawn back to full cock emphasized the command.

CHAPTER II

Turbulent Land

FOR a third time, Hatfield pulled Goldy up. From the shadows emerged three men. The foremost hold a cocked rifle at the ready. The hands of the other two hovered over the butts of the sixes swinging from their belts.

"Where yuh figger yuh're headed for?" demanded the rifleman.

"Town," Hatfield replied tersely.

"Well, yuh ain't," growled the other. "We've had enough of cowboys in this town for tonight." He stepped forward a pace, peering upward with outthrust neck.

"Come down off that horse and let us look yuh over," he ordered.

Hatfield obeyed, dismounting in a leisurely fashion. When his feet touched the ground he was quite close to the rifleman, as close, indeed, as Jim Hatfield ever needed to be to a man who might make a threatening move.

"Get yore hands up, and turn around," the rifleman directed.

HATFIELD slowly raised his hands, and things happened. One long arm shot out. He jerked the rifle from the man's grasp. At the same instant a fist like a block of iron crashed into that astounded individual's chest, hurtling him back against his companions.

With a wrench of his powerful hands, Hatfield broke the rifle stock in two. He dropped the ruined weapon; his hands flickered down and up. The three men, one gasping for breath, the other two going for their guns, froze in grotesque positions, staring with fearful eyes into the yawning muzzles of two long, black Colts that had "just happened" in the Lone Wolf's hands.

Hatfield spoke, his lazy drawl replaced by brittle accents like rock grinding against steel:

"All right, now, what's the notion—throwing down on folks peacefully ridin' an open highway? Talk! While you're able to!"

The red glare of the burning well struck full on Hatfield's deeply bronzed, high-nosed face, outlining his prominent jaw and chin, and the rather wide mouth with its grin-quirked corners, that was now set in a hard line, and flickered from his eyes that were normally of a peculiar shade of green, but were now coldly gray as wind-swept winter ice.

The three men cringed before the menace in those terrible eyes.

"We—we're oil well guards," gasped the foremost, still laboring to get some breath back into his lungs.

"What of it?" Hatfield retorted. "The nearest well is half a mile from here."

"You cowboys fired that well over there," the other gulped.

Hatfield nodded, recalling the speeding riders who had passed him farther up the trail.

"Oil well guards, eh?" he remarked. "Happen to be deputy sheriffs of this county, too?"

"No, we ain't," the man admitted, in surly tones.

"That's all I want to know," Hatfield told him. "All right, get yore hands up, and turn around."

The three obeyed. With hands high in the air, they stood rigid while Hatfield mounted.

"Get going, down the trail," he told them. "If you try to run or start anything, I'll shoot you. That town over there is the county-seat, isn't it?"

"Uh-huh," one guard mumbled in reply.

"Right into town and to the sheriff's office," Hatfield directed. "Yuh can drop yore hands, now, but be mighty careful what you do with them."

With the mumbling, cursing trio slogging along ahead of him, Hatfield walked Goldy slowly down the trail and across the level. The burning well was some distance from the trail.

As they passed it, Hatfield could see men running about as close as the heat would permit.

"Reckon they'll blow it with dynamite," he mused. "Only way to put the fire out. They'd better step lively and get it done before the wind takes a notion to get up, if they don't want the whole field blazing."

THEY passed through the outskirts of the town. Now and then a curious passerby barked a question at the strange procession, but Hatfield's only reply was a shake of his black head. However, by the time they reached the sheriff's office, which was some distance along the main street, quite a crowd was trailing behind Goldy. They paused, and stood talking and gesturing, when Hatfield dismounted and urged his three captives up the steps and into the sheriff's office.

The sheriff, a lanky, grizzled, droop-mustached old-timer, looked up from his desk, where he had been working, when the procession clumped into the room. His jaw dropped, his eyes bulged.

"What in blazes!" he demanded.

The three oil well guards started to volley explanations, but Hatfield's voice cut through their yammer like a silver blade through clabber.

"Gents sort of got off their home range," he told the sheriff. "Threw down on me with a rifle up the trail. Tried to keep me from coming to town. I figger they overstepped their authority a mite, and that you ought to know about it."

The sheriff's jaw dropped a little more. Abruptly he clamped it tight. His gaze ran over the Lone Wolf's towering form, dropped to the angry countenances of the guards.

"I don't know who the tarnation you are, feller, or where yuh come from," he told Hatfield, "but I reckon yuh got a just complaint if these jugheads tried to hold yuh up on the open trail." He turned his attention to the guards.

"What about it?" he demanded. "Is this feller talkin' straight? Did yuh tell him he couldn't come to town?"

The foremost of the guards admitted in mumbling tones that what Hatfild said was correct. The sheriff glowered at him.

"Why'd yuh tell him he couldn't come to town?" he demanded.

"Well," mumbled the guard, shifting his feet uneasily, "some hellions from the ranches set fire to that well tonight and—"

"And you hellions were out there on the trail stoppin' folks because of it, eh?" interrupted the sheriff. "Yuh know blamed well yuh ain't got no authority off oil company property. This feller had a right to plug yuh like any other hold-up sidewinders. Yuh're lucky he didn't."

He turned again to Hatfield.

"You give 'em in charge?" he asked. "If yuh do, I'll lock 'em up."

Hatfield grinned slightly, and his green eyes were sunny.

"Nope," he replied, "don't reckon I do. No damage done, after all, and I reckon they were a mite riled and went off half-cocked. Turn 'em loose."

The sheriff grunted some profanity under his mustache.

"All right," he told the guards, who were looking rather shame-faced. "Get goin', and stay on company property after this, before somethin' bad happens to yuh."

The guards slouched out. The sheriff

stayed Hatfield with an imperative gesture.

"I ain't done with you yet," he remarked significantly. His gaze ran over the Lone Wolf, centered on the double cartridge belts encircling his lean waist, and on the black butts of the heavy Colts flaring out from his sinewy hips and never seeming very far from his slim, muscular hands.

"Two-gun man, eh?" he growled. "I've got enough and more than enough of that kind hereabouts of late. Where yuh come from? Where yuh headin' for? Figger on stoppin' off here, or just passin' through? Set down over there and give a account of yoreself."

Hatfield sat down, removing his wide hat. In the lamplight, his thick, crisp hair shone so black that a blue shadow seemed to rest upon it. There was a mirthful gleam in his green eyes as he regarded the irate old peace officer.

"Reckon you're Walsh Chumley, eh?" He chuckled. "Captain McDowell said I wouldn't have any trouble spotting you—a ganglin' old gent who was always growling about something."

"Huh!" exploded the sheriff. "Yuh talkin' about Bill McDowell of the Rangers? Why that ornery old longhorn! I never recollect a time he wasn't roarin' or grumblin' about somethin'! He—say! how come you been havin' truck with the Rangers? Now I reckon yuh *have* got some explainin' to do. Been in trouble with McDowell, eh? How come yuh got loose?"

HATFIELD continued to chuckle. He had been fumbling with a cunningly concealed secret pocket in his broad leather belt. Now he laid something on the desk between then, something that flashed in the lamplight.

The sheriff's jaw dropped lower than it had before. He stared at the object, a gleaming silver star set on a silver circle—the feared and respected badge of the Texas Rangers.

"Well, I'll be blasted!" he gulped at last. "A Texas Ranger! So yuh're a Ranger, eh? I wondered if Bill was goin' to pay any attention to my letter. Rather expected he'd answer that the matter was one for the local authorities to handle and if I couldn't do it, they'd better elect a sheriff that knew his business. I knowed I laid myself wide open for him to take my hide off when I wrote that letter, and havin' knowed him for about forty years, I figgered he wouldn't let such a chance slip by. But I asked for a troop, not one high-pocket galoot. I—say, feller! by gosh, I know you. Yuh're the Lone Wolf!"

"Been called that," Hatfield admitted, with a smile, returning the badge to its place of concealment.

Sheriff Chumley drew a deep breath.

"Well," he said slowly, "McDowell always did know his business. I reckon one Ranger will be enough, if it happens to be the Lone Wolf."

"Hope so," Hatfield returned, his face suddenly grave. "Just what is the trouble hereabouts? From what yuh wrote McDowell, I figgered things are sort of out of hand."

The sheriff snorted. "That's statin' it mild," he replied. "There's the start of a war here that will make the Dewitt County row look like a tussle between two un-weaned calves. Yuh saw what happened tonight. That oil well didn't catch fire by itself, and the cowmen of the section will get the blame, whether they are to blame or not."

Hatfield frowned thoughtfully, recalling the hard riding band that passed him on the trail. The light had been too dim for him to make anything of the riders' faces, but he had been able to see that they were garbed in typical range garb and rode like cowhands.

"What's the chief trouble between the cowhands and the oil companies?" he asked.

"The chief trouble," the sheriff replied slowly, "is Tom Cragg and Carse Vibart."

"And how's that?"

"Cragg owns the Cross C, Vibart the Lazy V," Chumley replied. "They're the biggest and best spreads in the section. They lie to the southwest of here, takin' in the hills to the west, and curvin' around to the east to form almost an L. The wells lie in the elbow of the L and to the northeast of the Vibart and Cragg holdin's. Farther east are other spreads, quite a few of 'em, good property, but small."

The old sheriff paused to take a chew of tobacco.

"Vibart and Cragg have just about run

this whole section for the past fifty years or so, and their dads and granddads before them," he went on, finally. "They sort of got used to dictatin' policy and procedure, and until the oil strike here last year, nobody arg'fied much with 'em. But since the wells opened up, things have been different. Lots and lots of new folks come into the section, and big money.

"Vibart and Cragg always used to have the say about county officials, members of the legislature, and so on. But last fall the oil men ran their own slate and just about shoved it through at election time. I'm the only candidate who managed to get in on the old line ticket, and I did it by the skin of my teeth. That didn't set well with Tom and Carse."

Hatfield nodded thoughtfully. He understood perfectly the situation that was building up in the section. Cragg and Vibart represented a type familiar to cow country. Cattle barons, owners of broad acres, men of substance and solidity, who held almost feudal sway over the domain of which their holdings were the core. Intolerant of opposition and accustomed to putting down any encroachments with an iron hand, they would bitterly resent new arrivals with new ideas regarding the old, settled order of things.

"The country's going ahead, and they're standing still," Hatfield mused to himself. "They are trying to hold back the wheels of progress, and that's a chore that's stumped bigger men than ranch owners. But just the same they're capable of kicking up plenty of a ruckus. Their system is outmoded, but they don't realize it. In the end, they'll be better off, just as everybody will be; but making them see it is a considerable chore."

"Are Vibart and Cragg the sort who would fire the oil wells?" he asked aloud.

THE sheriff hesitated before replying. "Well," he said at length, "I figger Vibart wouldn't go in for any such hell raisin', but I wouldn't say for shore about Tom Cragg. Tom's a salty proposition. He's got more than one dead man to his credit, and it's purty well known that he made his start by runnin' wet cows across the Rio Grande, and goin' in for a mite of smugglin' on the side. Folks say, though it ain't never been exactly proven, that he used to run with a bad bunch in the old days.

"For a long spell, though, he's been plumb respectable, aside from a ruckus or two with gents he didn't get along with. He's rarin' and chargin' right now. He's organized most of the ranchers and got 'em to refuse to sell cows to the oil companies. But he's sort of bitin' off his nose to spite his face there, I'd say, because this town provides a mighty good market for surplus beef. Top prices, short drives, cash on the corral bar. But Cragg has a fool notion that he can starve the oil workers out. He does make their meat cost 'em plenty. They have to ship most of it in by railroad and then over here by wagon freight."

"You said he organized most of the ranchers," Hatfield remarked. "Does that mean some are selling to the oil companies?"

The sheriff nodded, and tugged at his mustache, while his grizzled brows drew together in a frown.

"Right there is the makin' of trouble," he said. "The Notched Seven, a small outfit down to the east of San Cajo Mountain and the Cross C is sellin' to the oil companies. So is the WX, young Val Blake's ranch, which is north of the Notched Seven, and there's the Leanin' G, southeast of the Notched Seven, which a newcomer named Ace Givens bought last year from old Hank Johnson. The Leanin' G is a purty big spread, but not over well stocked. Johnson let it sort of run to seed, but Givens has been improvin' it considerable. Them three refused to string along with Cragg and Vibart."

"And bad blood between them in consequence," Hatfield observed.

"Right!" grunted Chumley. "Cragg has already had a run-in with Givens. I busted that up just in time."

Hatfield nodded, very thoughtfully. "And how do the oil companies feel about the thing?" he asked.

"They're gettin' mighty riled," Chumley replied. "There's been a heap of minor sabotage, and run-ins between the cowhands and the workers, but nothin' over serious till tonight. Then there's been considerable wideloopin' goin' on of late, and the cowmen say the element the oil strike brought in is responsible. I'll have

to admit some salty characters have squatted in the section of late. That's why I didn't look over favorable on you when yuh showed up."

"Can't say as I blame yuh," Hatfield admitted. "Reckon you got yore troubles."

The sheriff swore gloomily. "That's statin' it mild," he growled. "I got—brimstone and blazes! What now?"

The room rocked and reeled to a thundering explosion followed by a mighty crashing and rumbling. The rafters creaked, the walls shook. Both windows were blown in. Shattered glass clattered on the floor. The door banged wide open.

CHAPTER III

Fightin' Man

JUST a moment, Hatfield and Chumley sat stunned by the terrific concussion. Then they leaped to their feet and headed for the door.

"They must have blown that well to put the fire out," Hatfield said on a guess. "But they used too much powder and put the charge too near the surface."

"Shucks, it was closer to us than that," the sheriff retorted. "Listen! Folks are goin' crazy outside."

From nearby came a chorus of yells, and the thud of running feet. Hatfield and the sheriff reached the street. The glare from the distant burning well still cast its reddish glow over the scene. They paused for a moment, uncertain which way to turn.

"The new refinery buildin'—they blowed it up!" shouted a man who came plunging down the street. He flashed past, wild-eyed, his face working with excitement, and vanished around the corner.

"This way," exclaimed the sheriff. He hurried in the direction the runner had taken, Hatfield close at his heels.

They rounded the corner, sped down the street and quickly came to an open space upon which stood what had once been a partially constructed building. Now it was a chaos of destruction. Bricks and stonework and massive beams were strewn over twisted and broken machinery, streamers of smoke drifted up from the ruins. The air was pungent with the fumes of burned dynamite.

Men were running up from all directions. The sheriff shouldered his way through the crowd.

"Anybody killed?" he demanded.

"Reckon not, unless it was the night watchman," a man replied. "Nobody workin' here at night. Gosh, what a mess!"

A big, grizzled man came pushing to the front. His eyes were a cold blue, his mouth a hard line, and his face purple with rage.

"This passed the limit, Chumley," he roared, shaking his fist in the sheriff's face. "My patience is done. From now on it's war. Those sneaking range scalawags have asked for it, and now they'll get it. I'll ruin Vibart and Cragg and run them out of the country if it costs me a million dollars."

"Yuh have no proof that Cragg and Vibart had anythin' to do with this, Mr. Irwin," the sheriff returned quietly.

"I'd like to know who else!" spat the other man. "Haven't they gone out of their way persistently to make us all the trouble they could? All right, I could take it when they worked in a business way, no matter what I thought of their ethics, but wanton destruction like this is something else. And taking a chance on murder. Where's the watchman?"

"They found him over in his shack," a bystander volunteered. "He was tied up and gagged. Ain't hurt much, 'cept for a bump on his head. Said somebody slipped up on him in the dark and hit him with somethin'. Knocked him out. When he come to, he was in his shack, tied up."

"You see," Irwin said grimly. "This was no accident. All right. If you can't do anything about it, Chumley, I'll take a hand. And I'll do something, you can rely on that."

"That's Jason Irwin, owner of the Eureka Company, and one of the richest oil men in Texas," he told Hatfield. "He's a fighter, too, and ain't givin' to idle threats. There's perdition in the makin'!"

Jim Hatfield had an unpleasant premonition that the sheriff was right.

"I went over to the oil well right after the fire started, about two hours ago," re-

marked the sheriff. "Nothing I could do there, so I came away. When I passed the Rio Grande saloon, a little later, a bunch of Tom Cragg's hands was at the bar. Let's go see if they're still there."

Hatfield agreed and they headed for the Rio Grande, which was some distance down the main street. When they arrived at the saloon it was well crowded with oil workers, but no cowboys were present.

"They left about an hour back," a bartender answered the sheriff's question. "Forked their broncs and rode off to the west."

Chumley turned to Hatfield. "That must have been the bunch yuh met ridin' up the trail," he said in low tones. "Wish yuh'd told me about them before I let those oil guards go. I'd have questioned them about the fracas they had with the punchers before I let 'em go. Well I'll do that tomorrer."

HATFIELD noted that the oil workers regarded him with scant favor, doubtless due to his range attire. But with the sheriff present, they confined their resentment to scowls and mutterings among themselves.

The sheriff downed his drink. "Reckon I'll mosey back to the office," he said. "No point to hangin' around here."

"Reckon I'll stay on for a spell," Hatfield replied. "Place looks interesting."

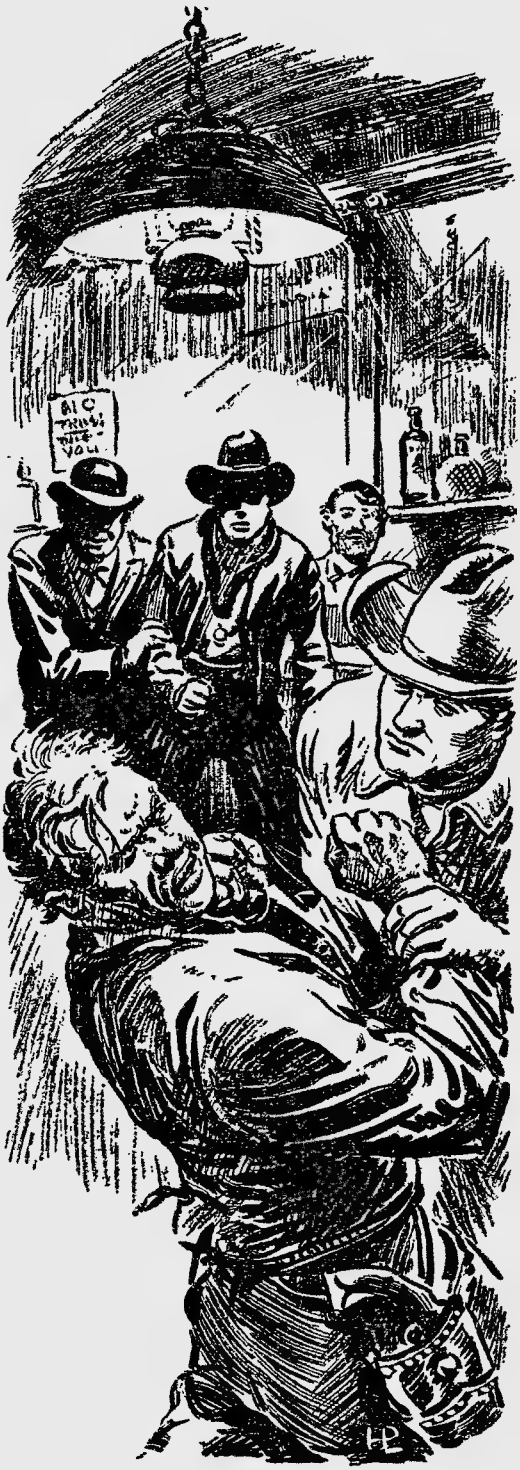
"I've a feelin' these fellers here don't take over well to a feller in cowhand clothes, not after what happened tonight," the sheriff returned doubtfully. "They might start somethin', after I'm gone."

"Reckon I'll take a chance," Hatfield replied lightly.

"Keno," growled Chumley. "I've a notion yuh can take care of yoreself."

With a nod, he stalked out. Hatfield turned back to the bar and contemplated the scene in the back-bar mirror. He quickly decided that the sheriff was right in his estimate of the temper of the oil workers. Black looks were shot in his direction, and there was a low-toned muttering among the various groups. Finally a huge giant of a man got up from a nearby table and approached the Ranger.

As he approached, Hatfield noted that he had a hard, scarred face, cold blue eyes set beneath bushy brows and a tight, thick-lipped mouth. His long gorrilla-like



Two more blows, which felt as if they were tearing his head from his body, landed on the big man's jaw (CHAPTER III)

arms swung loosely at his sides, the wrists ending in great hairy hands. When he came close, Hatfield turned to face him.

The other man paused, deliberately looked Hatfield up and down.

"Feller," he rumbled, "us fellers perfer not to drink with cowhands."

Hatfield let his level green gaze rest upon the other man's face.

"Don't rec'lect asking you to have a drink with me," he drawled in his deep musical voice.

The ruffian stared, momentarily taken aback by the reply. Then the scowl on his face darkened.

"I mean to say yore kind ain't wanted around," he said harshly.

"Nope?"

"Nope," the other mimicked. "Now get out of here, while yuh're able to walk."

"Reckon I can take my time, then," Hatfield replied easily.

"Huh!"

"Figger on being able to walk for quite a spell yet," Hatfield explained.

The big man glared. Somebody nearby snickered aloud. His face flushed darkly red. He roared a curse, stepped forward and swung a huge fist. It shot forward, irresistible as a cannon ball, straight for Hatfield's face.

But Jim Hatfield's face wasn't "there." His feet did not move, but his long body weaved gracefully aside. The fist whizzed harmlessly over his shoulder. The next instant a punch like the smash of a battering ram sank into the big man's stomach. As he dropped his hands, with a gulp of agony, two more blows nearly tore his head from his sagging body. He reeled, whirled around, and landed on the floor with a crash that shook the rafters.

Jim Hatfield, his alert gaze sweeping the stunned room, raised his brimming glass from the bar with a hand that did not spill a drop, and took a sip.

For a long moment the silence was absolute. It was broken by the incredulous gasp of a big rigger standing nearby.

"Good gosh! It was always Spike Jackson's brag that he'd never been knocked off his pins! Well, he's off 'em now, and proper!"

Hatfield, his lips twitching slightly, turned to the slack-jawed bartender.

"Throw a bucket of water over him and he'll be all right," he directed.

But Spike Jackson did not require the unexpected bath. Already his shaggy head was rolling from side to side with returning consciousness. He opened his eyes, cursed, raised an uncertain hand to his swelling jaw. He sat up, staring dazedly around. He shook his head, and sprang lightly to his feet. With legs widespread, he stood and stared at Hatfield. Then abruptly his thick lips split in a wide grin that showed strong, crooked teeth as white as snow.

"Feller," he said, with a grimace of pain as he moved his jaw, "I always said I'd love a man who could lick me. I reckon I'm plumb loco about you!"

Still grinning, he stuck out a huge paw. The two big men shook hands, smiling into one another's eyes.

Spike Jackson turned to face the silent crowd of his fellows.

"This feller," he said slowly, "may wear cowhand clothes, but he's a bully boy with a glass eye to me, just the same. And if any of you cross-eyed, sand-grubbin' monkeys figger different, let him step up and see if he can knock me down!"

Nobody seemed inclined to accept the invitation. Jackson whirled to the bar.

"Whisky!" he bellowed uncompromisingly. "A drink for the best man what ever spit on the soil!"

CHAPTER IV

Fire Out

HURRIEDLY the barkeep came forward with a bottle. Hatfield and Jackson raised their glasses and drank. The latter wiped his lips, grinned at his late opponent.

"Yes, suh, feller, yuh may be a cowhand, but I reckon yuh're some different from the scum what frequents hereabouts," he declared. "Yuh are for my money, anyhow."

Hatfield regarded him gravely. He had no doubts as to the big man's rough honesty.

"Jackson, a little while ago, you sort of made a mistake," he said.

"Reckon that's right," the oil worker

admitted, tentatively rasping his chin with a stubby forefinger. "Leastwise my jaw feels like I did."

"Well, admitting that, don't you figger it possible yuh might be making another?"

Jackson considered a moment, frowned.

"Reckon I get what yuh mean, but I don't figger I am," he replied. "Not after what happened tonight. It's plain as print. A bunch of them scallywags who work for that fish-faced Tom Cragg were in here, drinking, and talkin' low among themselves. All of a sudden they amble out. They ride out of town. Then not long afterward, that well lets go. Then right on top of it comes that explosion at the refinery. Sort of funny, don't you think?"

"Mebbe," Hatfield admitted. "But sometimes things look like what they're not. As I get it, you fellers figger Tom Cragg and Carse Vibart are back of the trouble you've been having hereabouts. I don't know Cragg, and I don't know Vibart, but from what the sheriff and that big oil man, Irwin, said about them, I figger they're well-to-do ranch owners.

"This means they're pretty good business men and understand, among other things, the power of money. Would men with that understanding think they could run the oil company away from a producing field like this one by setting fire to an oil well and blowing up a half completed refinery?

"Does that make sense? Wouldn't they know the oil companies would fight back? And wouldn't they know, too, that the companies would be able to spend a hatful of pesos for every one they would be able to put into the business? Could they hope to win such a ruckus?"

Jackson frowned and grumbled, and rasped his chin. "What yuh say sort of makes sense," he admitted. "But mebbe they'd do it out of pure cussedness."

"Knock on the gates of the penitentiary, or, if somebody got killed, take a chance at stretching a rope, just to satisfy a hankering for cussedness?" Hatfield countered. "Besides, from what I've heard of the Cragg hombre, he's the sort that comes up to yore face and busts yuh in the jaw, not the sort to slip up behind and stick a knife in yore back. Haven't yuh heard the same thing?"

"Reckon I have," Jackson again admitted. "I do know he had a run-in with a bunch of the boys here in town, and backed the hull passel of 'em down. Stood right up to 'em and dared 'em to have a showdown. Was hangin' his hand over the butt of that old long-barrelled Smith and Wesson he packs and showin' he was plumb willin' to pull it out. Some of the boys was heeled, and they ain't exactly chickens, but they decided not to take a chance. Cragg showed he was plumb willin' to get cashed in, but aimed to thin out the boys a mite before he handed over his chips. Oh, he's a salty gent, all right, even if he is about two years younger than Noah. But if it isn't Cragg and Vibart and fellers what run with 'em who're kickin' up dust, who is? Tell me that, will yuh?"

"I can't, not yet, anyhow," Hatfield replied. "But it looks to me like it must be somebody with something to gain from stirring up trouble. The question is, who?"

"I can't answer that one," said Spike Jackson. "Fact is, I never thought of it in that light. But if yuh happen to be right, what would they figger to gain by startin' a war like this one?"

"An old owlhoot trick is to turn two factions of honest folks against one another," Hatfield replied. "Then each blames the other for whatever goes wrong, and the ornery tykes slide in and skim off the cream when nobody's watching the pan."

JACKSON thought there might be somethin' to it.

"Yuh make out a good case for the cattle nurses," he admitted grudgingly, "because yuh're one of 'em, I reckon. But, dadgummit! yuh got me bothered. I like a battle, but I'd hate to feel I was doin' the fightin' for some slick hellion who was standin' back behind and not takin' any knocks."

A pleased smile quirked the corners of Hatfield's rather wide mouth. He changed the subject, confident that a seed of doubt had been planted in the big oil worker's mind, a seed that would grow, and be communicated to other men.

They discussed the oil drilling business, and Jackson was vastly surprised to learn that the "cowboy" knew as much, or even more, about it than he did. What Jackson

did not know was that, before the murder of his father by wideloopers sent him into the Rangers, Jim Hatfield had had three years in a famous school of engineering. He was thoroughly conversant not only with the production angles of the business but was also well-grounded in the basic principles governing oil deposits of which the uneducated driller had only the vaguest notions. But the driller possessed a fund of crude knowledge that Hatfield found interesting.

"This field was started the funniest way I ever heard tell of, and I've worked in fields all over the country," Jackson said. "Old Zack Ray located the site of the first well with a witchin' stick. Yuh know what a witchin' stick is, of course. It's a forked stick, a peach limb bein' mostly perferred, which the witcher holds balanced in his hand. He walks along and wherever there is oil or some other mineral buried under the ground, the witchin' stick gets busy.

"The feller usually holds it by the two fork ends, and when the stick is right over the spot, the nub end pulls down. Fellers say the end will come down or the stick will bust, so hard is the pull. Now anybody with a mite of sense knows witchin' sticks and sich things are jest foolishness; but just the same, old Ray swore he spotted the oil that way. He was a friend of Jason Irwin, the big oil man, and somehow or other he arg'fied Irwin into drillin' where the witchin' stick pointed. And I'll be a wall-eyed galoot if a gusher didn't come in! Did yuh ever hear tell of anythin' like it?"

Hatfield looked thoughtful.

"Wonder what started Ray witching for oil?" he remarked. "Never was any discovered hereabouts before, was there?"

"Not that I ever heard tell of," replied Jackson. "Fact is, the section ain't got hardly any surface indications. There ain't no salt domes, which often mark oil deposits, nor any oil scum on the ponds or criks that I ever heard about. Ray is dead, now. Fact is, he died before the well come in, and if he told Irwin any more about the witchin' stick foolishness, that Irwin hombre sure enough kept it to himself."

Hatfield nodded, his black brows drawing together until the concentration furrow was deep between them, a sure sign the Lone Wolf was doing some hard thinking.

A distant booming explosion shook the room. Spike Jackson cocked his head sideways.

"Reckon they just blew her," he remarked, apropos of the burning well. "Wonder if they got the fire out?"

A moment later he shook his head.

"She's still rumblin'," he said. "Hear it? I figgered they were goin' to have trouble with that one. The pressure in that well isn't over high and the fire spreads out low down. They can't get close enough to place the charges proper. Can't do much good with a fire like that by chuckin' dynamite sticks at it. I figgered as much when I looked her over, right after she first started."

"You don't work for the company that owns the well?" Hatfield asked.

Jackson shook his head. "Nope, that's one of the Irwin wells," he replied. "I work for the Lone Star Company."

Hatfield nodded, his eyes thoughtful.

"Suppose we amble out there and have a look," he suggested.

"Okay by me," Jackson replied, draining his glass. "Let's go."

TOGETHER they left the saloon and repaired to the site of the burning well. Hatfield learned that Jackson had been right. The fire mushroomed out close to the ground, and the intense heat prevented the fire fighters from getting close enough to work effectively. Nearby he saw Jason Irwin scowling at the pillar of flame and looking very bad tempered indeed.

Hatfield gazed at the operator, then suddenly strode over and touched him on the shoulder. Irwin turned. His scowl deepened as he ran his eye over Hatfield's range garb.

"Well, what do you want?" he demanded, with a profane designation of location.

"Nothing," Hatfield replied. "I've just got a suggestion to make that may help you with this chore, if you care to listen."

Irwin did not look receptive. His scowl deepened still more and he half opened his lips. But something about the level gaze of the tall Ranger curbed the imminent explosion.

"All right," he growled, "I'll listen.

Make it short."

"Why don't you try the inclined plane method against that fire?" Hatfield asked. "I've used—seen it used once or twice, and successfully."

"What you talking about?" Irwin demanded crustily, but with a gleam of interest in his blue eyes.

"You build an inclined plane with a pretty steep slant. A length of a hundred feet or so would do in this case, I figger. The foot of the plane must be directly in line with the well and as close to it as the heat will permit. The lining with the well must be absolutely accurate. The plane must be laid out by transit sights. And the floor of the plane must be spirit leveled. It can be quite narrow, and built of anything that's handy. Shouldn't take more than seven or eight hours to build, with plenty of labor and material at hand.

"At the head of the plane you place a small car—a stout wooden box on wheels will do. Load the car with dynamite, and some scrap iron to hold it level. Send the car down the plane. You'll notice the ground around the well is smooth and level.

"The momentum gathered by the car in the course of its trip down the incline, will send it across the ground from the foot of the plane to the well, and dump it into the opening the fire has blasted out around the well shaft. That will drop the dynamite where it should be and when it lets go, it will blow the well proper, shut off the flow of oil, and put out the fire. Get it?"

"I do!" exclaimed the oil operator, his eyes glowing with excitement. "Son, I don't know who you are or where you come from, but you got a head on your shoulders. We'll try it."

He turned away, hesitated, turned back again, measuring the Lone Wolf's tall form with his shrewd eyes.

"Know how to handle a transit?" he asked.

Hatfield nodded.

"Okay," said Irwin. "Will you take those sights, and superintend the construction of the plane? I have a feeling you know more about it than you mentioned, and are better able to handle it than anybody else around here. Will you? I'll make it worth your while."

"Be glad to lend a hand to help you," Hatfield returned. "But I don't take pay for doing folks a favor."

Irwin stared at him, hesitated, met his steady eyes, and nodded.

"Thank you," he said. "I accept," and hurried off to make the necessary arrangements.

As soon as the transit was procured, Hatfield set the tripod with the greatest nicety, adjusted the plumb bob and spirit levels, and trained the telescope on the center of the column of flame that marked the well shaft. He took his sight, clamped the thumb screws tight and sent a man forward with a surveyor's rod until he was as close to the fire as the heat would permit. The rod was shifted until the cross-wires of the telescope showed true against its numbered surface. A stake was driven at the point the rod touched the ground. Sights were taken to make the line of the inclined plane, and stakes driven for guidance.

A swarm of carpenters and riggers went to work. The flimsy structure rose swiftly under their expert hands. The foot of the plane was leveled off with the ground, to prevent the car from tipping over upon leaving its surface. The incline was constructed as steep as safety would permit. A rough ladder led from the ground to the head of the plane, which was many feet high. Side boards were nailed in place to hold the descending car to the plane.

MEANWHILE, blacksmiths and wood workers were busy contriving a small wooden car on iron wheels. Full day had broken before all was ready. The car was anchored at the head of the plane. Men ascended the ladder gingerly with bundles of dynamite sticks and loaded them into the car, the floor of which was weighted with iron. Finally everything was in order.

Jason Irwin gazed up the tall and rickety ladder at the black length of the snaky fuse dangling from the capped dynamite.

"Reckon I can't ask any of my men to light that fuse," he observed, shedding his coat. "It's a risky chore. If anything should happen to go wrong—well, it would be just too bad for the fellow who struck the match. Anyhow, the charge is almost sure to explode before the man

who lights the fuse can get down again, and the shock may tumble that crazy contraption over. Reckon it's up to me."

Hatfield smiled down at the oil operator, running his gaze over his heavy body and his gray hair.

"Pardon me for saying it, suh," he remarked, "but you're hardly as young as you once were, and not quite as light on yore feet, I figger. I'll take over that chore for you, if yuh don't mind."

Jason Irwin was not used to being crossed in anything. His mouth set hard.

"I do mind," he replied, "I'm telling you I'll light that fuse."

"And I'm telling you that you won't," Hatfield answered.

Irwin stared, his jaw sagging slightly, at the tall young man who appeared to have usurped all the authority in sight.

"Why—why—" he sputtered.

Jim Hatfield smiled down at him, his green eyes all kindness. He laid a hand lightly on the old man's shoulder.

"You're a good man, suh, and you've got sand," he said. "Now get the boys in the clear, and trail along with them."

With a pat on the operator's back, he turned, strode to the ladder and began ascending even more swiftly than had the experienced riggers.

The flimsy structure creaked and swayed under his weight, but he reached the top of the ladder without mishap. He struck a match, touched it to the end of the fuse. There was a sputter, a spurt of smoke, then the steady sparking of the burning fuse. Hatfield flipped the "anchor" loose and began descending the ladder.

The car shot downward, gathering speed at every turn of the wheels, a spurtle of smoke trailing behind it. Hatfield was less than halfway down the ladder when it shot from the incline and scudded across the ground to the well. It fairly leaped into the heart of the pillar of flame.

Istantly there was a thundering explosion. Smoke billowed up, shot through with clots of flame and a torrent of earth and stone. The web of uprights and crosspieces that supported the incline swayed and rocked. There was a splintering and crashing as it buckled in the middle.

Hatfield went down the reeling ladder hand over hand over hand, dropped the last dozen feet to the ground, whirled and fled madly to escape the rain of falling timbers. As he raced toward the yelling crowd, he was conscious of a figure that puffed and blowed beside him.

"Where in blazes did you come from?" he demanded.

"I was waiting at the foot of the ladder," panted Jason Irwin. "Did you think I'd get in the clear and to safety while you were risking your life to save my property? You go to the devil!"

Hatfield chuckled, but said nothing.

They reached the crowd of whooping drillers, breathing hard. Big Spike Jackson let out a roaring bellow.

"Yuh did it, feller! Yuh blowed her proper. Fire's out! Feller, yuh're a wonder! If there's anythin' I'm scairt of, it's dynamite. I wouldn't have climbed that cussed chicken-runway and lit that fuse for all the oil fields in Texas!"

CHAPTER V

Trouble in Prospect

LATER Hatfield had breakfast with Irwin and, after promising to meet with the oil operator at his office later in the day, went to bed in a very pleasant frame of mind. He felt that he had accomplished considerable in the few short hours he had been in the section. He had gained the respect of both the oil workers and the well operators, and felt sure that any suggestions he might see fit to make would be received favorably and be given serious thought.

"Now if I can just get the same sort of a lucky break with the cowmen," he mused. "But I still sure would like to know what all the shootin's about. I'm beginning to have a hazy sort of idea as to why, but who in blazes is back of it all? That's what I want to know more than anything else. Well, maybe something will bust loose to give me a line on what's going on and who's pushing the herd along."

With this thought uppermost in his mind, he went to sleep, not to awaken until late in the afternoon.

After a sluice in the icy waters of the trough in the rear of the stable, Hatfield set out in search of something to eat. When he reached the main street, a herd of cattle was rolling in from the west with much clashing of horns and bellowings of protest. A glance at the brand marks told him they belonged to the Leaning G spread owned by the newcomer, Ace Givens.

Riding at the head of the punchers who shoved the herd along, and evincing authority, was a youngish, well set-up man with a lean, deeply tanned, irregular featured face that was not improved by the white weal of an illy-healed scar running from the corner of his left nostril to the angle of the jaw. His eyes were a very light gray that seemed even paler against the deep bronze of his cheeks. His mouth was firm set, his jaw hard and muscular. He had a long cleft chin and a prominent nose.

Hatfield surmised that he was Ace Givens, the owner.

The set of the rider's cinches and other appointments of his gear caught Hatfield's eye.

"Not a Texan, I'd say," he mused. "Looks like a California outfit. A salty hombre, or I'm a heap mistook."

He watched the herd disappear down the street in a cloud of dust and then repaired to a nearby restaurant. After enjoying a good meal and a leisurely cigarette, he left the restaurant and strolled along the street until he reached Jason Irwin's office. As he entered, he met the man he surmised to be Ace Givens coming out. Givens gave him a sharp look but did not speak.

Hatfield found the oil man at his desk, sheafing over some papers.

"Just bought a herd of beef for my grease monkeys," he remarked, after greeting the Ranger. "Takes a heap of red meat to keep them going. Beef and whisky, that's what the hellions live on. I do my own slaughtering. Ace Givens brought the herd in—reckon you met him going out. He owns the Leanin' G and is one of the three owners who sell us meat. Seems not a bad sort. From a remark or two he's dropped from time to time, I'd say he knows something about the oil business. Not strange, though, seeing as somebody said he came here from California. They're doing a lot of drilling over there."

This bit of information seemed to interest Hatfield.

Irwin riffled his papers, fixed his frosty eyes on the Lone Wolf.

"Want a job?" he asked abruptly.

Hatfield smiled slightly. "That depends," he replied.

"Depends on what?"

"The kind of job," Hatfield explained.

"I've been doing considerable thinking since last night," Irwin replied obliquely. "If there had been a strong wind blowing yesterday evening, the consequences might have been very serious. This whole field could have gone up in smoke. I've decided that what I need is a man to keep a constant eye on things, to check what's going on around here. Most folks figger the cowboys who were in town last night set that well and dynamited the refinery. I don't. I figure both jobs were done by somebody who knew his business.

"Firing an oil well is not a chore for a cowhand without experience in such mat-

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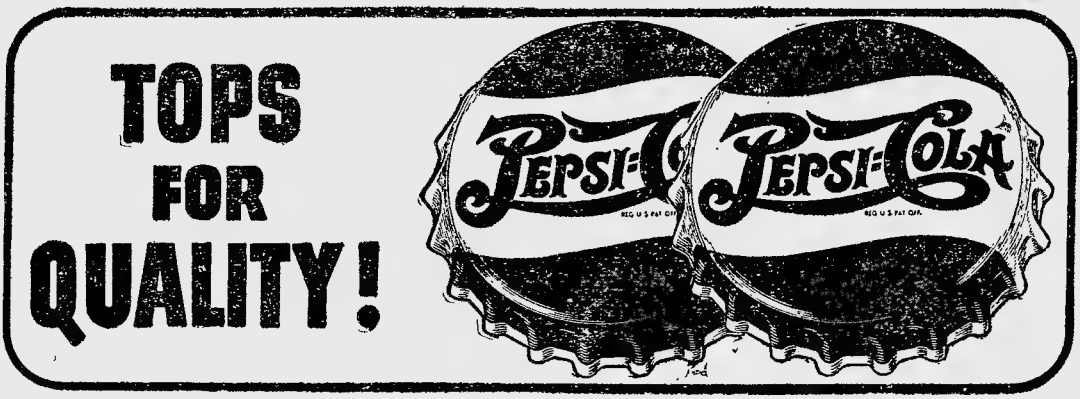

ters. That was the work of an expert. So was that dynamite job. The charges were so placed that the building and the machinery are a total wreck. Which means very carefully planned and executed work. Undoubtedly the ranch owners who are opposing the oil companies were back of it; but they have hired somebody or somebodies to handle the thing for them. Somebody supposed to be working for me is undoubtedly in their pay."

FOR A moment he paused, eyeing Hatfield. The Ranger nodded agreement.

"I'd say you're right, suh," he replied. "Whoever is back of this trouble has planted somebody in yore outfit, all right. Whoever is back of it."

"Not much doubt in my mind as to who is back of it," growled Irwin.

"Considerable in mine," Hatfield said quietly.

Irwin started to bristle, but apparently thought better of it.

"Anyhow, somebody has been making trouble," he said, "and it's pretty certain they'll try to make more. So I still figure my notion is a good one. What do you say?"

"I'll take the job, suh, on condition that I am not interfered with and am given free rein to handle it any way I see fit," Hatfield replied quietly.

Irwin considered a moment. "Okay," he said. "Handle it any way you please. There'll be no check on you."

"All right," the Lone Wolf accepted. "Don't be surprised at anything I may do, even if I should happen to take a job with some other outfit at the same time."

Irwin snorted, shrugged his shoulders.

"I've got a feeling that I've taken on a headache," he grunted, "but maybe it won't be as bad as the one I already have."

"And it may cure the one you already have," Hatfield replied, with the ghost of a smile.

Irwin nodded, and his face grew square and stern.

"Meanwhile, I'm carrying the fight to Cragg and Vibart," he said. "They've asked for trouble, and they're going to get it. I'm going to hit them in their weakest spot, what's usually the weakest with many Texas ranch owners—the authenticity of their titles to the land they claim to hold. Both inherited their properties from their fathers, and they inherited from their fathers before them. I understand that title to both properties is based on old Spanish land grants."

"The courts have confirmed validity of those Spanish grants before now—Treaty of Hidalgo Guadalupe," Hatfield interpolated.

"I know," Irwin returned grimly; "but not always. More than once the so-called grants have been proven rank forgeries. Sometimes, even, the claims have been based on nothing. Upon proper examination of records, no grant has been found to exist other than in the imaginations of the claimants. I have reason to believe such will prove to be true in this case. Anyhow, I'm going to take a whirl at it."

Hatfield looked very grave. Here, he realized, was the making of big trouble. Such a fight would be very liable to explode in violence at any moment, whether Irwin won or not. He studied the determined face of the old fighter, and decided to let the matter rest in abeyance for the time. He changed the subject.

"I heard a queer yarn last night about how this field was discovered," he remarked.

A smile softened Irwin's face.

"Old Zack Ray and his witching stick, eh?" he chuckled. "Yes, that was a funny one," he admitted. "Zack Ray was the kind of man who covered up what he really thought or believed with spoken nonsense. He was practical, hard-headed, and splendidly educated. His library in the Ray ranchhouse, to the north of the spur of the hills, is as well stocked and well chosen as any in Texas, I'm willing to wager. When he came to me and suggested I sink a well here on his land, naturally, I asked him where he received the notion there might be oil underneath it. There are certainly no surface indications. All I got out of him was a grin, and, 'I located it with my witchin' stick.'"

Irwin paused to light a cigar. Hatfield took advantage of the opportunity to roll a cigarette with the slim fingers of his left hand. Irwin blew out a cloud of smoke and continued.

"Of course I had a hunch he was covering up, but knowing Zack Ray as I did, I was confident he must have some-

thing pretty definite to go on. So I brought in a rig and drilled. Well, we hit a gusher, and that was the beginning of the field. But before I could get out of Ray what he really knew, he went and got his neck busted gentling a wild horse."

THE Ranger studied Irwin reflecting for a while.

"You haven't been able to figger anything out?" Hatfield asked.

"Not definitely," Irwin replied. "I have a theory, though, but not much to base it on."

"That this field is a drainage pool?" Hatfield asked.

Irwin shot him a quick look, his brows drawing together.

"Seems to me you know one devil of a lot about the oil business, for a wandering cowhand," he growled.

"Mebbe, for a wandering cowhand," Hatfield smiled agreement.

Irwin grunted. "You're right," he admitted. "That's just what my theory is. I figger this is nothing but a drainage pool—a seepage throughout the ages from a much bigger reservoir somewhere. Of course the main deposit may be many, many miles from here, and in any direction. I'd give a lot to know just how Ray got the idea there was oil here. It wasn't guesswork, that I'll wager. He knew something, all right, but wasn't ready to speak out. Perhaps he wanted to have his theory, whatever that was, substantiated. Well, it was. What interests me most, is where did he obtain his initial information?"

"That's a question, all right," Hatfield admitted. He paused a moment, eyeing the trickle of blue smoke arising from his cigarette.

"And did yuh ever figger that somebody else might possibly possess the same information?" he asked in casual tones.

Irwin frowned. "What you getting at?" he demanded.

"It might provide a reason for all the ruckus that's been kicked up hereabouts of late," Hatfield observed.

Irwin rubbed his chin with a big hand. "Meaning?"

"Meaning that somebody might have a pretty good theory as to where the main deposit is located," Hatfield replied.

"And you figure that would justify what's been happening?"

"I wouldn't use the word 'justify'," Hatfield demurred. "But, as I said, it might be the reason."

"But what would they hope to gain by causing us trouble?"

"That one is still to be figgered out," Hatfield answered. "Find the answer to that, and the chances are you'll find at the same time who is responsible for all this."

"I still figure I've got the answer to that last one," Irwin stubbornly declared.

Hatfield smiled slightly, but made no direct reply to the remark.

"Who owns the Ray ranch now?" he asked suddenly.

"Old Zack's son, Arnold," Irwin replied. "He's a funny character, is Arnold. Bookish, a bit of a recluse. Doesn't seem to care much about anything except his collection of books and manuscripts and old curios. When the oil came in he sold his cattle and went out of the ranching business.

"Now that he has plenty of money to devote to his hobbies, he takes no interest in anything else. He's in touch with collectors all over the world and carries on correspondence with them. A nice fellow, though. Likes people and is always ready to talk. I've a notion you and he would get along fine together."

"May take a ride up and see him some time," Hatfield said.

"Do that," nodded Irwin. "He'd be glad to see you. And he's got the best Mexican cook in Texas."

"Wonder if he knows anything about what you think his father had learned about the possibility of an oil deposit on the land?" Hatfield asked.

"I doubt it," Irwin replied. "About the only thing he and the old man had in common was books. Zack was considerable of an outdoor man—a good rider, a crack shot with rifle and revolver. He used to be a salty proposition in his younger days. He liked to prowl around in the hills and out on the desert. He was mixed up in one or two filibustering expeditions and knew all the old-timers. Arnold is the antithesis of all that. I doubt if Zack ever talked to him much about business matters."

Hatfield nodded, but continued to look thoughtful.

"Well, what you aiming on doing the rest of the day?" asked Irwin, returning his attention to his papers.

"Figger I'll cinch up and have a little ride around the field," Hatfield replied. "Still wants several hours till dark."

"Not a bad notion," Irwin agreed. "Get a line-up on the section."

CHAPTER VI

Red-Headed Girl

WITH a word of good-by to the operator, Hatfield left the office. He got the rig on Goldy and rode out of town at a leisurely pace. Workmen at the wells glanced at him curiously as he ambled past. One or two nodded. A couple of Spike Jackson's cronies, who had been in the Rio Grande saloon the night before, bawled greetings.

Around the outskirts of the field, new derricks were being erected. Hatfield eyed the operations with interest. The trail ran close to where one of the towering structures was nearing completion. The huge walking beam was at the moment being swung high in the air by a steam hoist, preparatory to being stepped into place. As Goldy paced past the derrick, the arm of the steam crane swung around, until the beam, at the end of the cable, rocked and teetered above the trail. Hatfield glanced up at it, high above his head and directly in front of the sorrel's nose.

Suddenly there was a screech of machinery, a frantic chattering of the engine's exhaust, and a chorus of shouts.

Hatfield's voice rang out, knifing through the uproar:

"Trail, Goldy, trail!"

The sorrel shot forward, bounding his full length in one convulsive leap. Behind him, almost grazing his tail, the ponderous walking beam thundered down onto the trail. The loosened cable whipped about in snapping coils. A cloud of dust boiled into the air.

Hatfield whirled Goldy "on a dime." His eyes were the color of frosted steel as he stared toward the operating cab of the crane. Their full force concentrated on the face of the engineer, a little rat of a man with a crooked nose and a long blue chin. The man recoiled before the Lone Wolf's glance.

"The ratchet," he yammered. "It slipped. I told 'em yesterday the pawls were worn. They'd ought to have fixed it."

"Reckon they'd better not put it off any longer," Hatfield replied quietly. "Somebody's liable to get hurt."

"They'll fix it before I use this cussed thing again," the engineer declared, descending to the ground. He let out a flood of profanity at two men who were hurrying forward with wrenches and hammers.

Hatfield nodded, turned Goldy and rode on as if nothing had happened.

"Well, they've started early," he muttered to himself. "Ratchet slipped! And the rest of that mechanical gibberish. That hellion threw the clutch out and let her slide! Reckon he figgered he could get by with it by handing that line to a cowhand who wouldn't know the difference. Well, let him think he did get by. Let them think I believed it was nothing but an accident instead of a deliberate try at cashing me in. They'll try again, and mebbe be careless."

He rode on, watchful and alert, threading his way among the gaunt derricks. He reached the eastern edge of the field without further incident, turned north and veered to the west, skirting the fringe of wells. In the shadow of the hills he turned south, casting a glance to the north, where a long spur ran out from the main elevation. Back of this spur, according to Jason Irwin, was the ranchhouse of the deceased Zack Ray, discoverer of the oil deposit, and now occupied by his literary son, Arnold.

Hatfield rode at a steady pace until he reached the trail that dipped down the sag to the west. As he approached the forks, he noted a dust cloud boiling up from the south. It quickly resolved to a hard riding group of horsemen, a dozen or more. Hatfield reined in at the forks, hooked one long leg over the saddle horn and proceeded to roll and light a cigarette.

On came the horsemen, the irons of their speeding mounts b ting a low

thunder on the hard surface of the trail's south fork. As they drew near, Hatfield observed that the foremost rider, sitting his great bay horse a good two lengths to the front, was a squat, immensely broad-shouldered and long-armed individual.

Hatfield thought his face the most hideous he had ever looked upon. The small, deep-set eyes were jet black, with a glitter of dagger points in the sun in their depths and peering forth from beneath jutting, craggy brows. His nose was broken and driven inward, his mouth a thin gash across his face. The whole countenance was seared and puckered with the scars of old wounds and tanned to the color of saddle leather. His hair was snow white and curled down over the collar of his shabby black coat. But he sat his horse like a centaur and his upright figure and squared shoulders hinted at strength and energy beyond his years.

ONE look at him and Hatfield was convinced that this could be no other than the indomitable Tom Cragg himself, riding at the head of his Cross C punchers.

His followers were as salty a looking bunch of young hellions as Hatfield had ever laid eyes on. With loose rein and busy spur they swept past, focusing a battery of hard eyes on the lounging Ranger.

Hatfield watched them vanish into the outskirts of the town, the concentration furrow deepening between his brows.

"And that's the bunch Irwin figgers to get on the prod proper," he remarked aloud. "Gentlemen, hush!"

He pinched out his cigarette, cast it aside, and rode slowly in the wake of the Cross C outfit. And before another hour had passed, he was to see an example of the further friction that was building up in the section.

The lovely blue dusk was sifting down from the hills when Hatfield stabled his horse and set out in search of something to eat. The western sky was a riot of scarlet and gold edged with palest emerald. The hill crests were tipped with saffron flame. Overhead the first stars of night were pin-pricking into view.

The windows of the town of Mocha, that had been staring purple eyes, were turning to squares and rectangles of gold as lights glowed inside the buildings. The creak and whine of the derricks and the chattering thump of the drilling engines resounded to form a monotonous undertone to the voluble life that was quickening as the oil workers washed up and set out in search of diversion.

The hitch-rack in front of the Rio Grande saloon, the largest in town, was lined with the Cross C horses. The oil workers might prefer not to drink with cowhands, but their preference evidently carried little weight with Tom Cragg and his salty outfit.

A few doors farther down the street was another hitch-rack, that fronted a saloon with "Deuces Wild" adorning its plate glass windows. A half dozen horses were tethered at this rack, Hatfield noted the brand markings—Notched Seven.

"One of the outfits selling beef to the oil companies," he mused. "Don't rec'lect Sheriff Chumley saying who owned it."

As Hatfield drew near the Rio Grande, Tom Cragg came out and headed purposefully down the street. He walked with a solid planting of his feet, swinging his big shoulders truculently.

"Contentious old shorthorn with a chip on his shoulder all the time," Hatfield chuckled.

The Cross C owner was directly opposite the swinging doors of the Deuces Wild when two young cowhands came banging out, laughing and shouting. They slammed squarely into Cragg, nearly knocking him off his feet.

With a roar of anger, the old man shot out his great hands, gripped them by the collars, shook them as a terrier shakes a rat and hurled them headlong into the gutter. The two punchers lay for the moment half stunned.

Cragg stood glowering at them, growling and muttering, his hand hovering over the black butt of his long-barrelled old Smith. And at that instant a concentrated bundle of fury that must have weighed all of a hundred pounds hit him with both hands.

Cragg ducked back with an astounded yelp as the hard little palms smacked against his face. He didn't offer to hit back or pull his gun. He just ducked and yelped. And before he could raise his hands to protect himself, the small, red-

haired girl was at him again. Nails of the tapering fingers of one hand raked red furrows along his cheek. The other hand landed squarely on his broken nose. Cragg howled and dodged.

"Let me alone, yuh hellcat!" he bellowed. "Go 'way! Take her off me, somebody!"

Shaking with laughter, Jim Hatfield reached out, wrapped his long arms about the raging spitfire and held her helpless. She writhed and struggled, but could not win free. Hatfield drew her close, his arms gentle around her, but as unmoveable as bands of steel.

"Take it easy, ma'am," he said chuckling. "Want to cash in the old gent?"

"I'd—I'd like to!" she panted, her curly red hair fairly crinkling with anger. "Why can't he leave my boys alone!"

"Reckon it was a misunderstandin'," Hatfield said.

SHE writhed about in his grasp, looked up with wide blue eyes that met the quizzical gleam in his black-lashed green ones. Abruptly she ceased struggling and a wave of color flooded her creamily tanned cheeks.

"Please let me go," she begged, her voice low and throaty.

"Be good?"

"Yes, I'll—be good," she replied.

Tom Cragg shot her an apprehensive glance.

"Thanks, son," he said to Hatfield. "If there is one thing in the world I'm scairt of it's a woman. *Adios!*"

He turned, and swiftly made himself scarce. Hatfield released the girl and stepped back.

The two cowboys had gotten to their feet. The girl turned on them furiously. "What do you mean by starting a row with Cragg?" she demanded. "Haven't I got enough trouble without that?"

The young hands hung their heads sheepishly. "We didn't aim to start no row, Miss Mason," one explained. "It was a plumb accident."

"Reckon that's right," Hatfield corroborated. "They just bumped into him, coming out the door. Cragg went on the prod without giving them a chance to explain."

"He's always looking for a chance to make trouble," the girl declared. She held out her hand.

"Thank you for preventing me making a further exhibition of myself," she said to Hatfield. "I—I guess I lost my temper, too. I'm Mary Mason. I own the Notched Seven. Those are two of my boys, there."

Hatfield bowed over the little sun-golden hand with courtly grace, and supplied his own name.

"Don't mention it, ma'am," he said. "I just aimed to lend the old gent a hand. He was down for the count and hollerin' 'uncle.'"

The girl smiled, her white, even little teeth showing between her red lips. She started to reply, then paused, her gaze across the street. And again a wave of color suffused her cheeks.

Glancing in the direction of her gaze, Hatfield saw a tall, well set-up young man with a scarred face approaching. He recognized Ace Givens, owner of the Leaning G.

"Can I be any help, Mar—Miss Mason?" Givens asked, an amused gleam in his pale eyes.

"I'm afraid you are just too late," the girl replied. "This gentleman did all that was necessary. Mr. Hatfield, this is Mr. Givens, who owns the Leaning G. He's my neighbor."

Givens acknowledged the introduction and shook hands with a firm grip. His eyes were calculating as he looked the Ranger over.

"I saw it all," he chuckled. "Reckon it was the first time in many a day that Tom Cragg backed down."

"Cragg's a man of good judgment," Hatfield smiled reply.

"About some things," Givens qualified. "I was just aimin' to hunt up a bite to eat," he remarked. "You two care to join me?"

Mary Mason glanced at Hatfield expectantly. Givens' mouth tightened a bit as he noted the direction of her gaze.

But the Lone Wolf shook his head. "Just finished eatin', thanks," he declined. "You two go ahead. I'll be seeing you."

With a nod and a smile he sauntered on down the street.

The red-haired girl followed him with eyes that were a trifle wistful.

"Ace," she breathed, "did you ever see a more magnificent man?"

Givens' pale eyes narrowed a trifle.

"Sizeable enough, and he looks capable," he conceded. "Reckon he could give even Tom Cragg a considerable tussle."

"His arms are like iron bands," the girl remarked reminiscently.

Givens' eyes narrowed even more.

"Mary," he demanded abruptly, "are you gettin' interested in that hairpin after seein' him five minutes?"

The girl turned dancing eyes upon him.

"Ace," she said, "any girl could be interested in him, very easily. But," she added, switching abruptly to the present tense, "if she has a grain of sense, she won't be."

"Now what do yuh mean by that?" asked the bewildered Givens.

"No one woman can hope to hold the interest of his sort for long—not now, anyway," the girl replied. "To him, women are something to smile at, and—forget."

"Huh! I hope so," Givens growled.

The girl laughed, and regarded him slantwise.

"Come on!" she said. "Let's eat."

CHAPTER VII

Bad Blood

SLOWLY Hatfield crossed the street farther down and retraced his steps until he reached the sheriff's office. Sheriff Chumley was at his desk, and looking worried.

"See Tom Cragg is in town with his hellions," he remarked. The Lone Wolf nodded.

"Uppity old lobo," he remarked. "Looks like he's got plenty of wrinkles on his horns—too many to be stirring up a ruckus like he seems to be doing."

"Tom's as stubborn as a blue-nosed mule," the sheriff growled. "He set out to buck the oil companies, and he'll keep on buckin' 'em till he gets somewhere, or gets his ears pinned back. He's shore sot in his ways."

"Looks it," Hatfield conceded. "But I've a notion he can be made to see reason, if it is presented to him in the right way."

"Mebbe," the sheriff replied in dubious tones. "I wouldn't swear on it, though. When he gets mad up he's sort of beyond reason."

Hatfield rolled a cigarette.

"I was over at the trail forks when Cragg and his men rode in," he observed. "That south fork is the way to his spread?"

"That's right," the sheriff agreed.

"And the west fork, over the hills—does it lead to the Cross C spread, too?"

"Oh, you could get there by way of it, by ridin' clean around the south tip of the hills, but yuh'd be goin' forty or fifty miles out of yore way. Why?"

"I was just wonderin', that is if the bunch I met up the sag the other night—the bunch that had the ruckus with the oil guards—was really Cragg's hands, why didn't they take the south fork instead of riding west," Hatfield replied.

Sheriff Chumley tugged his mustache, and looked thoughtful. "I dunno," he said. "Don't seem to make sense."

"Just what I was thinkin'," Hatfield observed.

The sheriff speculated the Lone Wolf with his frosty eyes.

"Meanin' that yuh're wonderin' if that bunch yuh met really was Cragg's hands, eh?"

"Reckon you can see into a tree as far as the next one," Hatfield commented.

"But if they weren't Cross C hands, who were they?" the sheriff demanded.

Hatfield chuckled. "Ever hear the yarn about the liar's club and the ground hog?" he asked, a gleam in his green eyes.

"Now what?" growled the sheriff. "Nope, I never did."

"Well, it was like this," Hatfield began. "A bunch of the boys had a club where they got together and told tall stories, and asked questions. There was a catch to the question business. If a feller asked a question, anybody who couldn't answer had to pay a dollar into the fund to buy drinks. But if he couldn't answer the question himself, he had to pay five dollars. Get it?"

"Uh-huh," nodded the sheriff. "But what's that got to do with Tom Cragg and his hellions?"

"You'll see," Hatfield said cheerfully. "One night an hombre came bulging in all excited. 'Fellers,' he yelped, 'I got

a question: Why is it a groundhog don't leave any earth around the outside of his hole when he digs it?'

"Well, nobody could answer that question. They all gave up, and paid their dollar. 'Now, smart man, suppose you take a whirl at answerin' yore own question,' pipes up a gent who'd just pungled a dollar.

" 'Easy, plumb easy,' said the question asking gent: 'The ground hog starts at the bottom and digs up.' Well, everybody sort of goggles a minute, with their eyes bulging out. Then up pipes another gent. 'How in blazes does the ground hog get to the bottom to start diggin' up?' he wanted to know.

"The gent who'd asked the first question puts on a big grin. 'Pardner,' he says, 'that's yore question!' "

SHERIFF CHUMLEY chuckled. "I get it," he said.

"Uh-huh," Hatfield agreed with a smile. "Just who those ridin', shootin' gents were is yore question. Reckon I'll have to pungle up a dollar, but I also reckon you'll have to lay out five. But," he added gravely, "if either one of us could answer it, I've a notion we'd put a stop to the hell-raising hereabouts before it really gets going good."

The sheriff nodded. Hatfield smoked thoughtfully for several minutes.

"When did Ace Givens show up in this locality?" he asked abruptly.

The sheriff shot him a shrewd glance. "Been thinkin' about him, too, eh?" he remarked. "He landed here nearly a year back, right after the oil strike. Nobody seems to know much about him. Doesn't talk over much, and mighty little about hisself. Said he was born and brought up in California. Knows the cow business, all right. Been bringin' in good stock to cross with his longhorns.

"Friendly with Val Blake, and Mary Mason, who owns the Notched Seven and has been runnin' it since her dad died about a year and a half back. Tom Cragg jumped him when he agreed to sell to the oil companies, but didn't get very far with him. He's salty, all right. I busted that one up before real trouble could get started. Givens seems all right, but I dunno."

"I've a notion he's sort of interested in the Mason girl," Hatfield remarked.

"Eh? Yuh've seen her?"

Hatfield regaled Chumley with an account of the ruckus Tom Cragg had with the little redhead. The sheriff rocked with laughter.

"Guess Tom got his com-uppance for once," he chuckled. "He's plumb scairt of women. Never been married. Shies away from 'em like a skittish colt from a scrap of paper. I shore wish I could have seen that. I bet Tom coiled his twine and hit the trail, eh?"

"He went other places all right, and in a hurry," Hatfield smiled.

"I like that girl," said the sheriff. "When her dad cashed in—her mother died when she was born—she took hold and kept the spread goin'. Punchers usually don't take over well to workin' for a female boss, but her hellions swear by Mary Mason. She always was a ridin', shootin' tomboy and was always taggin' along with Curly Mason when he was alive. Curly knew the cow business from hoofs to horns, and taught her plenty."

"Looks like a smart girl," Hatfield said.

"Uh-huh, she's all right," the sheriff said. "Young Val Blake is sort of sweet on her, I've a notion. His dad and Curly Mason were friends. Hope she takes to him rather than to that scar-faced Givens nobody knows anythin' about. Val is considerable of a hell raiser, but ain't never been in no trouble anybody knows of. Fine lookin' young feller, all right, and considerable of a man. Purty well educated, though he didn't finish college, for some reason or other, don't know just what. Has traveled considerable, too."

Hatfield left the sheriff's office a little later and dropped in at the Rio Grande Saloon. He observed Tom Cragg at the bar, talking with a tall, black-browed, powerfully built man much younger than himself.

The barkeep who served him noted the direction of Hatfield's glance.

"Tom Cragg, owner of the big Cross C, and his foreman, Bill Barnes," he remarked, jerking his head sideways at the pair. "Salty hombres, feller, salty hombres, they—Whe-e-ew! here comes trouble!"

Glancing at the man who was pushing through the swinging doors, Hatfield had something of the same notion.

The newcomer was a tall and slender man, with the steely slenderness of a rapier blade. His eyes were clear blue, his features regular and finely proportioned. His pushed-back "J.B." revealed thick, wavy hair of a tawny yellow.

He was immaculately dressed in range clothes, point perfect from his fancily stitched boots of softly tanned leather to the vivid silk neckerchief looped about his sinewy throat. Hatfield noted that he wore two guns, and wore them in the manner of a man who knew how to use them. He glanced about, crossed toward the bar, his stride lithe and pantherlike.

"Hello, Uncle Tom," he greeted Cragg in a finely modulated, musical voice.

OLD TOM glowered at him.

"Don't 'Uncle Tom' me, Val Blake," he rumbled. "I'm plumb ashamed of yuh! Yore old dad—God rest him—would turn over in his grave if he knew what yuh're doin' with the stock he left yuh."

Val Blake smiled in an amused fashion.

"Yuh're livin' in the past, Uncle Tom," he said. "This country is changin', and we've got to change with it. The oil companies are here to stay, and we fellers might as well make somethin' out of them while we can. If we don't sell them beef, somebody else will. What's the sense of cuttin' off your nose to spite your face?"

"This used to be a good section," rumbled Cragg. "If us fellers would stick together, we'd keep it that way."

Blake laughed again, shrugged his shoulders and turned away. Hatfield noted that old Tom looked more hurt than angry as his glance followed the young man, who took a place at the bar a few places distant. But the black-browed Barnes flushed darkly and his eyes glittered.

"I'm goin' over and see Doc McChesney," Hatfield heard Cragg tell his foreman. "Be back in about half an hour. Wait here for me."

He stumped out, his thick shoulders swinging. Barnes, the foreman, settled back to the bar, and glowered at Val Blake's back. The owner of the WX spread turned at the moment, and their glances crossed. Barnes frowned, Blake smiled, an amused gleam in his clear eyes. Hatfield heard Barnes' teeth click together as he clamped his jaw tight.

"Time's liable to come when yuh won't have so much to grin about," he shot at Blake.

Val Blake continued to smile. "Stop pawin' sod, Barnes," he advised. "Yuh're gettin' as ringey as the Old Man."

"Yuh leave the Old Man out of it," rasped Barnes. "Yuh ain't fit to name him in your talk."

Blake's eyes narrowed. "Yuh're makin' a heap of big medicine, Barnes," he said. "If yuh want to stay healthy, yuh'd better latigo yore jaw."

"I'll put a latigo on yore jaw for yuh!" roared Barnes. He rushed, both fists swinging.

Blake hit him, right and left, hard. Barnes reeled back, spitting blood. He ducked his head and rushed. Blake dodged under his flailing arms, seized him about the thighs and hurled him over his shoulder. Barnes turned, catlike, in the air, landed on his toes, then stumbled, and sprawled headlong.

But his hurtling weight had been too much for Blake's slenderness. The WX owner reeled backward, lost his balance and fell, the back of his head cracking against the floor boards. He floundered over on his face, raised himself on hands and knees and struggled to his feet, to stand swaying, partially dazed by the blow on his head.

Barnes also got to his feet—with a rush. He whirled around, his face black with rage, blood and curses spewing from his mouth. His right hand flashed down and up. The muzzle of his gun lined with Blake's breast. His thumb tightened and the hammer came back to full cock.

Men yelled with alarm, then ducked wildly as the room rocked to the crash of a report.

CHAPTER VIII

Man of Letters

DAZED and swaying on his unsteady legs, Val Blake stared blankly at Barnes who was staggering back, pawing at his blood spurting hand. His gun, the lock smashed and broken, lay on the floor

a dozen feet distant.

"Hold it, all of you!"

Jim Hatfield's voice rang through the room like a silver bugle call. It beat down the rising clamor, stiffened the Cross C punchers in strained attitudes. Hands on their gun butts, they stood rigid under the menace of the long, black Colts rock-steady in the Lone Wolf's slim hands. Smoke still wisped from the muzzle of one. And the muzzles of both yawned hungrily toward them, seeming to single out each and every man for special and individual attention.

Hatfield spoke again, his voice quiet, but edged with the authority that expects, and gets, obedience.

"This has gone far enough," he said. "A wring is one thing—a killin' is somethin' else again. Drop yore hands from yore irons, you fellers. Barnes, come out of it, and get yore head back on yore shoulders. From what I heard yore boss say a little while ago, he thought sort of well of Blake's dad. I reckon he wouldn't take it over kind if you'd cashed Blake in. And, Blake, you might do well to tighten the latigo on yore jaw. Too much loose talking tangles a man's twine."

The Cross C punchers eased their hands from their gun-butts, and looked a little sheepish. Bill Barnes flushed to his eyes. He fumbled at his bleeding hand, looked down, looked up, then met Hatfield's eyes squarely.

"Yuh're right, feller," he said. "Much obliged for what yuh did, even if it did spile my iron and bust my hand. I ain't holdin' anythin' against yuh."

"Reckon I'm due to thank yuh, too—for savin' my hide," spoke up Val Blake, who had recovered from his daze and appeared considerably sobered by his narrow escape. He nodded in friendly fashion to Hatfield, turned his gaze on Bill Barnes, favored him with a long stare that was not friendly, and left the saloon. Hatfield holstered his guns and turned back to the bar, his eyes very thoughtful. Behind his back, men watched him with ungrudging admiration and respect.

"Talk about drawin' and shootin'!" exclaimed a Cross C cowboy. "Gentlemen, hush! I thought Buckskin Frank Leslie was dead!"

"Well, if he's come back to life, he's growed considerable," replied another puncher, measuring Hatfield's towering, wide-shouldered form with his eyes.

"And improved his drawin' and shootin' considerable, too," muttered a third. "Folks used to say Frank was the fastest draw and the best shot in the hull Southwest. Reckon mebbe he'd still be—next best."

Eyes followed Hatfield when he left the saloon, a few minutes later.

"Who is he, anyhow?" demanded a Cross C hand.

The bartender swelled importantly. "He's the feller who blowed that burnin' well last night, and put out the fire. 'Pears he's workin' for Jason Irwin. Reckon Irwin brought him here to sort of straighten things out."

A dead silence that endured for several moments followed this announcement. It was broken by Bill Barnes, who was nursing his creased hand, which he had tied up with a handkerchief.

"I been wonderin' for some time if the Old Man wasn't makin' a mistake by startin' this ruckus with the oil companies," Barnes said slowly. "Right about now I've stopped wonderin'."

Although he felt he had created a not unfavorable impression on the cowmen, Jim Hatfield was not pleased with the evening's events. They tended to strongly emphasize the ominous condition that was building up in the section.

"All set to boil the lid off any minute," he told himself. "Cowmen fighting with the oil companies, cowmen fighting with one another. If Barnes had downed Blake, the war would have started. One little slip and away she goes. I've got to work fast, and the trouble is I'm still riding a blind trail. Reckon the next move is to get in touch with Arnold Ray, old Zack's son, and see if he knows anything that might help."

THINKING deeply, he headed for the livery stable and his room over the stalls.

The following morning, after obtaining directions from Sheriff Chumley, Hatfield rode north. The trail he followed was a continuation of the track that led south to the Cross C ranch and the other spreads adjoining Tom Cragg's holdings. It was, in fact, the old trail from Laredo to San Antonio, that ran in the shadow

of lonely San Cajo Mountain, little used for many years until the oil strike boomed activities in the section.

Now, as he skirted the eastern tip of the hill spur, he met long strings of huge, freight wagons loaded with materials and supplies. Behind him, headed north, rumbled empties, bound for the railroad. About mid morning, shortly before he sighted the Ray ranchhouse set in its grove of ancient oaks, he met a swaying creaking stagecoach drawn by six mettlesome horses, one of the line that connected Mocha with Fowler, the railroad town thirty miles to the north.

The Ray ranchhouse was a commodious building, very old, and built in the Spanish style with a cool inner patio and overhanging galleries that looked down upon it. The barns and other buildings were tight and in good repair, but showed signs of dis-use, which was not surprising, seeing that Arnold Ray had discontinued ranching activities nearly a year before. A wrangler or two and a few old cowhands were pottering around, old-timers, doubtless retained by Arnold Ray because there was no place else for them to go. They had a contented look about them, however, that spoke well for the kindly disposition of the owner.

Arnold Ray proved to be slight of stature, thin, and ascetic looking, with hair that was already silvering despite the fact that he had not reached fifty. He had soft brown eyes, a humorous mouth and regular features. He welcomed Hatfield warmly and seemed pleased to learn that the Ranger was acquainted with Sheriff Chumley and Jason Irwin, the oil man.

"Both were old friends of my father," he observed. "It is a real pleasure to have you here, Mr. Hatfield. At times I grow hungry for human companionship and someone to talk to. One cannot live always with books, yuh know."

Hatfield understood that, and agreed. He found Ray a pleasant conversationalist and entertaining, his speech an odd mixture of meticulously correct English interspersed with Texas idiom and Mexican colloquialisms.

They ate together in the big dining room and Hatfield pronounced the Mexican cook all that Jason Irwin had claimed for him. Then they repaired to the main living room of the ranchhouse, which was also Arnold Ray's library. The walls were lined with books, hunting trophies, odds and ends of curios from all parts of the world, good paintings and prints.

Naturally the talk would eventually turn to the oil strike that was changing the region. Hatfield let Ray discourse on the subject for some time and then abruptly asked the question that had brought him to the Ray ranch.

"Do you happen to know, Mr. Ray," he asked, "whether your father had anything to go on other than the indications of his witching stick when he persuaded Irwin to drill his land for oil?"

Arnold Ray hesitated. Finally he said, "It is a matter I would rather not discuss, Mr. Hatfield, out of deference to the wishes of my dead father."

Hatfield nodded. He looked Ray over carefully, came to a decision. He was confident that the ranch owner was trustworthy and not given to loose talk. He laid the silver star of the Rangers on the table between them.

[*Turn page*]

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Ray stared at the badge, nodded his silvering head.

"I see there is more back of your question than idle curiosity," he observed.

"Yes," Hatfield told him. "Considerably more. Things are in bad shape hereabouts, Mr. Ray. There's the making of big trouble in this district, and I want to stop it before it busts loose. Anything you may be able to tell me is apt to be a big help."

"All right," Ray agreed, "I'll tell yuh what I know. It isn't much, but it may be pertinent. My father got his clue to the oil deposit from an old book he picked up in Mexico City. It was a transcription of correspondence between the monk of the San Antonio Mission and the brothers at other places. I do not have the book, but I believe I can recall the passage."

HE LEANED back in his chair, closed his eyes, and quoted, almost verbatim, the strange letter to which Hamilton Colyer, the banker and collector, had listened more than a year before.

When Ray finished speaking, Hatfield leaned forward, his eyes glowing.

"That's it, suh," he exclaimed. "That's where yore dad got his tip, all right. What the monk wrote about was undoubtedly a seepage surface pool of oil, in the cave. When he leaned over it, his torch ignited a pocket of gas and caused an explosion. He was lucky to get out alive. No wonder he thought the Devil had hold of him."

He chuckled sympathetically over the monk's harrowing experience.

"Yore father read that, and realized what it meant," he continued. "He must have been considerable of a geologist, to be able to figger out that natural drainage and seepage would concentrate an oil pool under his land."

"My father was widely read," Ray conceded. "He was a brilliant man, in his way, and he knew this country like the palm of his hand. He was always prowling about in the hills and on the desert."

"That mountain the letter spoke of, beside which runs an old trail," Hatfield mused. "Any notion where it could be, suh?"

"I'd say that it must be San Cajo, down to the southwest of here," hazarded Ray. "It is a considerable hill, part of Tom Cragg's holdings, and near it runs the trail you used to reach my place, which was the old trail between Laredo and San Antonio. I've heard there are caves under San Cajo. Robbers and smuggler bands that preyed on traffic over the 'lower trail' used to hang out in them, legend says."

"Sounds reasonable," Hatfield nodded. "About that book. Any chances of getting hold of it for a while? There might be further information somewhere in it."

"I feel quite sure I can obtain it," Ray replied. "My father gave it to his old friend, Hamilton Colyer, a New York banker and collector, for his birthday. Colyer spent considerable time down here. Used to visit my father and other friends he had in this section. I am certain he would be glad to send the book back for our inspection. Tell yuh what I'll do. I'll ride to Fowler, the railroad town to the north of here, tomorrow, and send Colyer a wire, requesting him to rush the book to me. That way we should have it in a week or so."

"That'll be mighty fine of yuh, suh," the Lone Wolf replied. "May be nothing further in it, but there's no telling, and I don't want to miss a trick. I'll take a little ride down toward San Cajo, meanwhile, and see if I can locate that cave. I'm beginning to see the why and wherefore of the hell-raising going on in this section. If I can just get a line on who's back of it, the rest will be easy. I've an uneasy feeling that something is going to bust loose mighty sudden."

Hatfield was right. Something was already "busting loose."

The afternoon stage rolled out of Fowler and headed south for Mocha. Although it carried no passengers on this trip, the coach doors were locked. Beside the driver on his tall perch sat an alert guard, sawed-off shotgun loaded with buckshot across his knees, rifle leaning against his leg. He was a grizzled old Indian fighter, known to be a dead shot and almighty quick on the trigger. A plainsman of wide experience, he missed nothing that went on around him.

As the stage rolled southward through the hills and over the flats, his eyes constantly roved ahead, covering every inch of the terrain with an all-embracing gaze. They searched thickets with a carping

glance, noted the actions of birds amid and, over the growth, the movements of occasional small animals.

THE driver, another old-timer, was also armed. He handled the reins with his left hand, his right never far from the butt of the heavy six swinging from his belt.

The stage was some fifteen miles out of town when the guard suddenly uttered a warning exclamation. His eyes were fixed on the pair of bluejays that wheeled and fluttered above a thicket flanking the trail ahead.

"Don't like the way them two jays is actin'," he told the driver. "Slow down."

The driver pulled his horses to a walk.

"Figger there's somebody holed up in that thicket?"

"Could be," the guard replied, his eyes still fixed on the bristle of brush. "Them jays are actin' up. Mebbe it's only a snake foolin' around their nest, or a wildcat or somethin', but we ain't takin' no chances, not with what we're packin'."

"Nobody knows we're packin' it. The stuff was supposed to have gone through yesterday."

"Mebbe again," the guard grunted, his eyes unswerving. "Funny things been happenin' in this section of late. I ain't takin' chances."

"If somebody's holed up there, they're liable to plug us as we go past," the driver said, apprehensively.

"I'd like to see 'em shove a gun barrel through that brush," the guard growled. "The sun's shinin' square on it, and my eyes don't miss nothin'. Keep lookin' for any kind of a shine, and cut loose at it without askin' questions."

Across the trail from the thicket, and directly opposite it, stood a tall, thickly leaved tree with wide-spreading branches. After a single quick glance that assured him there was nobody hiding behind its trunk, the guard paid the tree no more mind. He concentrated on the thicket, above which the jays continued to whirl and swear. Suddenly he tensed.

"I heard a horse stomp, or I'm a sheepherder," he declared in low tones. "There's somebody in there, all right. Get set, and let 'em have it if they ride out."

The driver gripped the butt of his six. The guard cocked both barrels of the shotgun. The stage rolled on, slowly, lurched past the dark fringe of growth and into the green and gold shadows cast by the branches of the tree. The eyes of both guard and driver were fixed unwaveringly on the ominous thicket. So intent were they that neither heard a slight rustling and creaking amid the tree branches over their heads. They leaned forward, their shoulders touching.

Something hissed down from among the leaves. A loop dropped over the shoulders of both, was instantly jerked tight.

The shotgun let go with a booming roar, then clattered to the floor boards as the guard fought frantically to free his pinned arms. The driver never had a chance to get his six out of the holsters.

The horses, startled out of their wits by the crash behind them and the whistle of buckshot past their ears, lunged forward. The stage was dragged from under the driver and guard. Suspended in mid-air at the end of the rope that hung down from amid the branches, they kicked and strained and howled curses, but were helpless to free themselves from the loop cutting into their flesh.

There was a crashing of brush and from the thicket rode six masked men. Four menaced the struggling pair with drawn guns, while the other two dashed after the careening stage. They quickly caught up with the clumsy vehicle and subdued the frightened horses.

From the tree that stretched its branches across the trail, a man came lithely down, hand over hand. He dropped lightly to the trail and surveyed the noosed stage hands through the eyeholes of his mask. He was tall, with broad shoulders bundled in a heavy rough coat that made him look bulky. He chuckled audibly at the stage crew's raging helplessness.

"Good!" he told his companions, who had dismounted, his voice deep and almost growling. "Get their guns and cut 'em down. Then tie 'em up good and tight and lay 'em down to rest. Step lively, now, before somebody comes along. Wagons on this trail all the time."

HIS ORDERS were obeyed with dispatch. The driver and guard were disarmed, securely bound and placed

alongside the trail. Meanwhile, the remaining two owlhoots had smashed open the stage door and ripped up the floor boards. Now they appeared staggering under the weight of an iron strongbox. One bore a sledge-hammer that had been bound back of his saddle.

"Knock off the lock and put the pesos in your saddle-bags," the tall leader, who had dropped the noose from the tree ordered. "Divide 'em up as even as yuh can. Don't want any one horse overloaded. We've got to make speed."

This was quickly done. The old guard swore luridly as rolls of gold coin were transferred from the box to the saddle-bags. The tall leader, who stood to one side, superintending operations, turned his masked face toward him and chuckled again, apparently highly amused by the whole affair.

"Sorry to rope yuh up, old-timer," he said, "but we'll be needin' a mite of start. Tell the sheriff 'hello' for us when yuh get to town. Somebody will be comin' along here to cut yuh loose before yuh get too tired of lyin' down. Be glad we're nice fellers and don't hide yuh somewhere in the brush and gag yuh, where yuh'd be liable to starve to death before yuh were found."

The last words were said meaningly, with a slight change from the jovial tones preceding them. They had a sobering effect on the guard and the driver, who ceased their vituperation and contented themselves with glaring murder at their tormentor.

The last gold piece was stowed into the bags. A saddled horse was led out of the thicket for the accommodation of the facetious leader of the band. All seven bandits mounted and crashed away through the brush, heading west. The guard and driver tugged and strained at their bonds, and resumed their fervent cursing.

A full hour passed before a wagon came along and released the captives. Two more hours had elapsed when the lathered stage horses slithered to a stop in front of the sheriff's office. The raging guard and driver leaped to the ground and boiled in upon Sheriff Chumley.

"The oil payroll!" bawled the guard. "More'n thirty thousand dollars! They got every peso!"

CHAPTER IX

Cold Trail

AS JIM HATFIELD was returning to Mocha from his visit to Arnold Ray, he met the sheriff and his posse riding north. With them rode the old guard, his face set in vindictive lines, aching for revenge for the trick that was played on him. Hatfield accepted Chumley's invitation to join the posse.

"What do yuh think of it, Jim?" the sheriff asked in low tones as they rode together.

"Looks like the hellions were sort of considerate of the guard and driver," Hatfield replied.

"Meanin'?"

"Meaning that they might know them and didn't want to do them any damage if they could help it. Otherwise the bandit in the tree would just as likely as not have cut down on them with his shootin'-iron as they slid by underneath. Would have been easier, and a lot safer."

Sheriff Chumley tugged his mustache.

"Yuh might have somethin' there," he admitted, "but I don't see as it helps much."

"Might help us considerable," Hatfield disagreed. "If a local outfit did this job, they'll be hanging around in the district, and, the chances are, spending the money here. Ask the guard if there was anything familiar about them."

"I could have swore I'd heard the feller who did the talkin' before," the guard growled reply to Chumley's question. "His voice was sort of familiar, all right, and the general build of him, too. He was tall, and husky, and carried himself well. Acted like the hull business was a joke, consarn his ornery hide. I'd give a month's pay to line sights on him."

The sheriff gave Hatfield a significant glance.

"Looks like yuh might be right," he muttered.

"Somethin' else that might help get a line on the sidewinder," the guard added. "I noted he had a rag wrapped around his hand and wrist."

"A rag wrapped around his hand?"

Hatfield repeated quickly.

"Uh-huh, that's right, it was tied up. Might keep our eyes open in town for a feller with a tied up paw."

Hatfield and the sheriff stared at one another. By mutual consent they touched up their horses and rode a little ahead of the others. The sheriff had heard about the fight in the Rio Grande saloon, when Hatfield shot the gun from Bill Barnes' hand and wounded him slightly.

"I just can't figger Barnes or any of Cragg's bunch being mixed up in such hellishness," the sheriff remarked in low tones, when they were out of earshot.

Hatfield nodded, his eyes grave.

"Funny things happen, though," he observed. "Owlhoot pizen is sort of catchin'. When it starts busting loose in a section, it sometimes draws folks into it that never messed with such things before. Sometimes a gent has had a hankerin' to go after what he figgers is easy money, but never quite had the nerve or the opportunity. Then a bunch starts operating, and all of a sudden he figgers his chance. Figgers folks will blame whatever happens on the bunch that has been stirring the hell kettle. And sometimes it works out that way. Of course there's no proof that Barnes had anything to do with the holdup, but in our business you can't afford to pass up any lead. We'll just keep it in mind and watch to see if something else ties up with it."

Shortly afterward they reached the spot where the holdup occurred. The severed rope still dangled from the tree branch to which it was secured. It was an ordinary five-eighths manilla, the sort of twine used for heavy roping, and showed indications of considerable use.

"The man who packed it used it for range work," Hatfield deduced.

They located the spot where the horses had been concealed in the thicket. Various evidence indicated that they had spent some time there. The trail through the brush was plain and easy to follow. Not so easy later on, however, when it threaded its way through a labyrinth of gorges and canyons, veering gradually from the west until it ran due south through the hills.

"A local outfit, or at least one of them is," Hatfield declared. "They know this region like a book."

"Better'n I know it," the sheriff growled. "I never heard of this trail."

"Looks like it was used considerable once, long time ago," Hatfield said.

BY SUNSET they were far south of Mocha, and considerably to the west of the town, with the trail still flowing south. Abruptly, however, it veered to the east, and, a little later, eased out upon the rolling, brush covered rangeland.

"Now where in blazes are those bandits headed for?" the sheriff wanted to know. "I'd figgered all along they'd hightail south for the Border."

"Doesn't make much difference to us," Hatfield countered grimly, with a glance at the darkening sky. "Another half hour and there isn't a chance to follow this game track through the brush, and even if we could, all those hellions will need to do is turn off wherever they take a notion, even after they hear us coming, which they'll be shore to do."

"Uh-huh, and mow us down as we go past," growled Chumley.

Fifteen minutes later the sheriff gave the order to pull up and turn around. "It's no use," he said. "Back to town."

It was past midnight when they finally reached Mocha. They found the town seething. The oil workers, their expected payday wages postponed, were in an ugly temper. They seemed to take it for granted the cattlemen were responsible for the outrage. Audible threats were voiced and even Hatfield, though it was now generally known that he was in the employ of Jason Irwin, was the recipient of hostile glances.

Sheriff Chumley was plainly worried.

"It's just plumb luck that none of Cragg's or Vibart's hands happen to be in town tonight," he said. "If they were, I wouldn't answer for what might happen. Tomorrer I'm sendin' deputies to both them spreads to order 'em to keep out of town till this simmers down a mite. The companies will rush a new payroll from Fowler, and once those hellions get the money in their pockets and start shovin' it across the bars, they'll forget what happened. But just the same, it's only a matter of time till trouble does bust loose."

Hatfield was of the same opinion when

he went to bed to knock off a few hours' sleep.

Shortly after daybreak the following morning, Hatfield was in the saddle, riding south along the old trail that led to the Vibart and Cragg holdings and on to Laredo on the Rio Grande. On his right were the hills, their serrated crests glowing with the morning sunlight. To the left the brush grown rangeland rolled for unrestricted miles. To the southeast were more hills, shadowy against the sky.

Hatfield rode swiftly, for he had many miles to cover before reaching the granite bulk of San Cajo, his objective. Before long he began sighting bunches of cattle marked with Carse Vibart's Lazy V. Several hours had passed, however, and San Cajo was looming dark and mysterious but a few miles distant, when he saw the first cows branded Cross C. The Cragg ranchhouse he knew to be some miles to the east. A little later he reached the spot where the track leading to the Cross C buildings forked from the main trail.

With the sun well up in the morning sky, Hatfield rode slowly along the trail that skirted the base of San Cajo. Soon he left the trail and rode the slopes and shallow valleys of the lower mountain, studying the terrain with experienced eyes.

Gradually a look of perplexity deepened on his face, changing to one of plain exasperation.

"The thing doesn't make sense," he growled at length. "If there's any oil under this blasted chunk of granite, I'm a sheepherder. There isn't a single oil indication anywhere. The rock isn't right, and it isn't right, either, for any possible reversal of slope below, which would be necessary for a drainage pool farther north, seeing as the surface slope is all to the south. Of course, it's not possible to be absolutely shore of that, but all indications are against it. Well, we'll do a little more lookin' "

BUT further exploration merely tended to confirm his opinion. There were many caves in the cliffs, some of which he entered, but nowhere was there a cavern remotely resembling the one the old monk described in his letter. Far up the mountainside, Hatfield pulled Goldy to a halt, hooked his leg over the horn and rolled a cigarette. For some minutes he sat smoking, gazing over the country to the southwest.

"Begins to look like old Zack Ray just had a stroke of plain bull luck," he mused at last. "That is if he based his opinion on that letter. He just happened to hit on oil. Or, mebbe," he added with a chuckle, "he did use a witching stick. I'm ready to swear the cave the monk found wasn't anywhere around here. Of course, it could be miles farther to the south. Folks in this region call all these 'bumps' on the ground mountains, and he might have been talking of any hill between here and Laredo."

To make his research exhaustive, he descended the mountain and rode into the western hills, climbing higher and higher until he was riding the crest of a long hogback that extended south as far as the eye could reach. From his elevation, the range country to the east was spread out like a map and he could clearly see insignificant details. He was some miles to the south of San Cajo when his eyes narrowed with interest. A sizeable herd of cows was rolling toward the trail from the east, with four hands riding in attendance. Setting the average of one rider to every two hundred and fifty or three hundred cows, Hatfield estimated the herd to consist of something like a thousand head.

"Looks like old Tom Cragg is pushin' a shippin' herd up to the railroad," he mused. "Hope they get past Mocha without trouble of some kind. The boys up there are in a bad temper."

But "trouble" was due for the Cross C riders before they sighted Mocha or were anywhere near the oil town.

Sitting his great golden horse on the crest of the ridge, Hatfield watched the tossing brown mass that was the herd and the black blobs that were the riders roll up to the trail. Suddenly he leaned forward in the saddle, tense and rigid, his hands instinctively dropping to the butts of his guns.

From the brush that flanked the trail came puffs of whitish smoke. Another moment and Hatfield heard the crackle of the distant rifles.

Two of the Cross C punchers whirled out of their saddles as if plucked by giant

hands. The remaining two jerked their dancing horses to a halt. Hatfield saw smoke spurt from their sides. Then a second crackling volley mushroomed swirling clouds from the brush. The two cowboys went down, to lie sprawled, and motionless and all but invisible amid the straggling growth of the range. Their frightened horses went careening out of sight.

The four dead men lay where they had fallen, looking very small and lonely in the midst of the rolling plain.

CHAPTER X

Trouble Shooters

POWERLESS to avenge, as he had been to avert the tragedy, Hatfield sat staring as seven men rode out of the brush and began turning the milling herd. He watched them straighten it out and send it rushing down the old trail. A moment later and the growth at a bend swallowed it up.

Hatfield switched his gaze to the murdered men. They lay in attitudes that told him they were beyond the help of human hands. He exhaled his breath in a long sigh, realizing he had been almost holding it since the first gun cracked. His face was set in lines as bleak as the granite of San Cajo. His eyes were cold as wind-swept winter ice. Purposefully, he gathered up his reins, settled himself in the saddle. Then he sent Goldy along the crest of the ridge at a swift pace, his eyes never leaving the trail bend where the wideloopers and the rustled herd had vanished.

The hogback curved slightly to the west, continuing to almost parallel the trail. A few minutes later Hatfield again caught sight of the herd, moving fast, urged to top speed by the riders behind. Grimly intent, he continued to ride the ridge, confident that he was unseen against the dark background of the higher hills, which now cast their shadows to the east. He glanced at the sun. It was nearing the hill crests. Soon twilight would be at hand. Far ahead the ridge petered out. The trail ran on, curving slightly to the west, hugging the base of the hills.

"Do the hellions figger to run that herd across fifty or sixty miles of desert to the Rio?" Hatfield asked himself. "But where else can they take it?"

To his intense surprise, before it reached the point where the ridge dropped in a sharp slope to the lower sags, the herd suddenly branched off to the left and continued in a southeasterly direction. Soon it was lost to sight amid the growth. Instantly Hatfield sent Goldy charging down the steep slope.

"Got to catch up with those rustlers before it gets dark, feller," he told the sorrel. "Then we'll see."

He had little fear of being detected by the owlhoots. The brush for some distance from the trail was tall and would afford a protecting screen. Once he was at the bottom of the sag, he would be perfectly safe, so long as he was not heard. There was small chance of the latter possibility, with the moving cattle kicking up a racket as they forced their protesting way through the growth.

For more than two miles the way ran through the straggling brush. The passing cows made a trail, however, that was simple to follow, even though the sun was now behind the hills and the shadows were gathering. The trail led almost due east, then abruptly veered more to the south.

Hatfield muttered an exclamation as the direction veered. The herd was now following a faint track, grass-grown and dotted with bushes and sizeable trees, but a definite trail, withal. It was quite broad and formed a depression in the level range.

"She was traveled plenty, once upon a time," the Lone Wolf muttered. "But from the height of those bushes that time must have been a heap of years back. There's a dwarf oak that must be all of sixty or seventy years old."

Hatfield rode with caution, knowing that the progress of the cattle through the brush must of necessity be slow, although they would find the going easier on the more thinly grown track. He strained his ears for definite sounds of the herd, and at length was rewarded by a querulous lowing, thin with distance, the wail of a weary, disgusted steer.

"Catching up," he told Goldy. "Don't want to get close enough for them to hear or spot us, but mustn't let 'em get far enough ahead to give us the slip in the dark."

The twilight deepened. The sky overhead flamed with a shattered rainbow of color. The dust, like turquoise dust, thickened the air. A sleepy bird nearby uttered a last drowsy note or two. A faint breeze sighed through the leaves, making a heart-chilling music. The glow of sunset faded, leaving the sky a steely blue that swiftly darkened to indigo pricked and sparked with silver. The shadows under the growth were purple pools curdling to ebony.

HATFIELD slowed still more, eyes and ears alert.

"Had ought to hear those cows poppin' the bushes before long," he told Goldy. "Easy, feller! If those sidewinders get first look, it'll be just too bad for us."

He heard a steer bellow, surprisingly close at hand. He halted Goldy and listened intently. There was no crashing of brush or beating of hoofs to be heard. Abruptly, however, he did hear sounds—crackling and thrashing sounds, then a distant murmur of voices. Suddenly he sniffed sharply. The air was tanged with the unmistakable whiff of wood smoke.

"Horse, we get a break," he muttered. "The hellions have stopped for chuck. May even be making a night camp. Must feel pretty shore of theirselves. Well, this may work out."

He hesitated a moment, then forced Goldy off the track and into the brush, where he tethered him. Sliding his Winchester from the saddle boot, he cradled it in his arms and glided forward along the trail. As he progressed, the sounds of activity ahead loudened. A little later and he sighted the gleam of the fire through a final fringe of growth. In the shelter of the last straggle of bushes he halted, peering with narrowed eyes at the scene ahead.

He was at the edge of a fairly sizeable clearing. A fire burned brightly near a small spring that sent a trickle of water across the open space. Moving about the fire were the seven cow thieves.

Hatfield could not get as close as he wished. From where he crouched the faces of the men were but white blotches, features indistinguishable. For some minutes he debated his course of action. He greatly desired to track the wideloopers to their mysterious destination, but abandoned the notion as impractical. In the full light of day they would be almost certain to spot him, and the results would be disastrous. Equally impractical would be an attempt to take prisoner the seven armed men. Undoubtedly they were desperate and would not hesitate to shoot it out with their would-be captor. The odds were too great.

"Nope, I can't drop a loop on 'em," he told himself. "But mebbe I can stampede them. Fellers on a chore like this are as nervous as a rabbit in a houndawg's mouth. I've a notion it'll work. Worth a try, anyhow."

He laid the rifle on the ground at his feet, drew both sixes from their sheaths. The cattle thieves were bunched around the fire, making preparations that showed they intended a night camp. Hatfield raised his guns.

For a long moment he hesitated. The ruthless killers deserved no more mercy than they had vouchsafed the Cross C punchers, but Jim Hatfield could not bring himself to shoot even murderous outlaws from ambush. He tipped the muzzles of his guns up a trifle and sent a roaring volley of lead whistling over the owlhoots' heads and around their ears. At the same instant his great voice rolled in thunder across the clearing:

"Let 'em have it, boys! Down 'em! Don't let one of the skunks get away!"

About the campfire was instant panic and pandemonium. The owlhoots emitted wild yells of terror, ducked and dodged. Two whirled toward the brush and jerked their guns. They sent wild shots in the direction of the flashes. Hatfield heard the hiss of the passing lead. He slammed his empty Colts into their holsters, snatched up his Winchester and clamped the butt against his shoulder. His icy eyes glanced along the sights. Now the Lone Wolf was shooting to kill.

The rifle boomed. A man spun around, dropped his gun and pitched headlong. A second crumpled up like a sack of old clothes. A third reeled back with a scream of agony, clutching at his blood spurting shoulder. The rest made a wild

dash for the horses tethered at the far edge of the clearing, the wounded man reeling and staggering after them.

With frantic haste the wideloopers hurled themselves into their saddles. With bullets hissing and screeching around them they sent their mounts charging into the brush and vanished from view.

QUICKLY Hatfield raced across the clearing, shoving cartridges into the magazine of his rifle. He sent a last volley crackling in the wake of the fleeing and demoralized rustlers. At the same time he uttered a series of yells. Reloading the rifle a second time, he listened intently. The crashing of the galloping horses was fading into the distance. Hatfield reloaded his sixes and turned back to the fire.

"Reckon that'll hold 'em for a spell," he muttered, and set about examining the two dead men.

Both were hard looking characters, their features distorted by death sharp and swift.

"Typical Border scum," Hatfield decided. "Nothing to set them apart."

Swiftly he emptied their pockets, and discovered nothing of significance. Their outfits were ordinary and bore no unusual marks. Two horses that had been left behind wore meaningless Mexican brands. Working swiftly, Hatfield got the rigs off both and turned them loose to graze. Then he turned his attention to the cattle that were snorting and milling, but too tired to stampede.

To shove a herd of its size through the dark and the growth was a hefty chore for even as experienced and expert a tophand as Jim Hatfield, but he relied on the utter weariness of the cows and the narrowness of the track to make it possible to hold them in line. He retrieved his horse and, after considerable difficulty, got the herd in motion and slogging along back the way they had come. It was a hard struggle along the narrow, bush-studded track and through the final two miles of brush to the trail, but after what seemed an eternity of effort, he made it.

Once upon the trail, the herd, sensing that it was returning to its accustomed feeding grounds, was easier to keep moving. As they progressed, however, the cows showed increasing tendency to stray, being anxious to get to grass and water.

But Hatfield grimly kept them bunched and moving. He reached the fork that led to the Cross C ranchhouse and turned his shambling charges onto it. Bawling and bleating, they dragged their weary hoofs over the three miles remaining. Dawn was streaking the sky with rose and gold when Hatfield sighted the Cross C ranchhouse on a little rise that gave root to a flourishing pinon grove.

Hatfield was haggard with fatigue, red-eyed from want of sleep, but he forced the worn-out, disgusted cattle to within a few hundred yards of the ranchhouse yard. He drew his gun and fired several shots into the air, waited a moment, and fired two more.

Within a moment or two lights flashed up in the ranch building and bunkhouse. The doors of the two structures banged open and men came pouring out in all stages of undress. Heading them was white-haired Tom Cragg in hastily donned boots, his six-shooter belted over his old-fashioned long nightshirt that flapped gaily in the morning breeze. He let out a bellow of astonishment on sighting the huddled shipping herd, and the tall form of the Lone Wolf riding toward him, and he profanely wanted to know what it was all about.

Hatfield enlightened him, in a few terse sentences. Cragg swore luridly. What he said was amplified by the Cross C hands as they learned of the fate of their bunkies.

"Three or four of yuh get the buckboard hitched up and head down there to bring the boys back," Cragg ordered at length. "Dang that Bill Barnes! He would hafta go sashayin' off right at this time!"

"Where's Barnes?" Hatfield asked with interest.

"Rode down to Laredo day before yesterday," Cragg growled. "Said he wanted to visit a cousin down there. I figger he's off on a bender and went to Laredo because I told him to keep out of Mocha for a spell. Never heard tell of that cousin before."

Hatfield nodded thoughtfully, but refrained from comment. Cragg looked him

up and down with undisguised admiration.

"Son, yuh size up better'n better each time I see yuh," he declared. "Yuh're a wonder! If yuh hanker for a job of ridin' at a mite better'n average top wages, say the word."

"I don't aim to work for a man who's forty years behind the times," Hatfield replied shortly.

OLD TOM glared and growled, and swelled like an outraged turkey-cock. But Hatfield's level green gaze was hard on his face, his mouth set in a tight line. Old Tom apparently thought better of the explosion he was on the verge of setting off. He compromised by rumbling in his throat, and further growling out in surly tones:

"Well, come on up to the house and get ready to eat. Then I reckon yuh hanker for a mite of shut-eye. Good bed all ready for yuh. Come on, come on. The boys will look after yore horse."

The cook threw together an excellent breakfast, to which Hatfield did full justice, having not eaten for more than twenty-four hours. In the big living room of the ranchhouse, he and Tom Cragg enjoyed a smoke together. The old cowman eyed him with a puzzled expression on his scarred and puckered features.

"Son," he said at last, querulously, "yuh're a funny prop'sition. Yuh got a way about yuh that makes a feller get bothered about his own way of thinkin'. Just what did yuh mean by that 'forty years behind the times?' "

"I mean this darn fool feud you're having with the oil companies," Hatfield returned, gazing at Cragg through the haze of his cigarette.

"But they hadn't ought to come in here and upset things!" Cragg barked. "We didn't need 'em, and didn't want 'em!"

"Mebbe not," Hatfield admitted. "But they're here, and they're here to stay. You can't run them out, and you know it just as well as I do. What you're doing is playing into the hands of unscrupulous hellions who are always on the lookout for just such a break and ready to cash in on it, like they're doing here now. Because of that nonsense, four good men died yesterday."

Tom Cragg shifted uneasily in his seat. His eyes, that were usually so steady and so truculent in their glare, shifted.

"I had them boys with me for nigh onto ten years," he muttered. "I'd have a heap rather lost that herd of cows than them."

"Hanker to lose some more?" Hatfield asked.

Cragg muttered under his breath, but made no direct reply.

"You're taking the chance, if yuh keep on the way yuh been goin'," Hatfield declared inexorably. "Might be a good notion to think that over a mite, before you have something else on yore conscience."

He stood up, his face stern, his eyes hard on the old cowman's face. "Now, if you don't mind, suh, I'll head for a little session of ear poundin'," he said. "I'm about ready to go to sleep on my feet. Have somebody wake me up in about five hours, please. I want to be back in town before dark."

"Think over about takin' that job of ridin'," Cragg called as Hatfield opened the door to his bedroom.

"And you think over why I won't take it," Hatfield replied, and closed the door.

CHAPTER XI

"Holstered Guns"

BLUE DUSK was falling when Hatfield reached Mocha. He stabled his horse and repaired to Jason Irwin's office. He found Irwin there, with him Sheriff Walsh Chumley.

"Was waitin' for yuh," Chumley said. "There's a feller over to my place who wants to see yuh."

"Okay," Hatfield replied. "See you in a little while, Mr. Irwin. Want to talk to you."

Upon reaching the sheriff's office, Hatfield discovered that the visitor was Arnold Ray.

"I sent the message to Hamilton Colyer, requesting the book we talked about," Ray said. "Here is the reply."

He drew a yellow telegram sheet from his pocket and passed it to the Ranger. His brows drawing together, Hatfield read—

WOULD BE GLAD TO SEND BOOK. IMPOSSIBLE TO DO SO. WAS MISLAID OR STOLEN FROM MY LIBRARY NEARLY A YEAR AGO.

COLYER.

Arnold Ray gazed expectantly as Hatfield studied the laconic message.

"What do you think of it?" he asked at length.

"I think that we made a mighty accurate guess about this business," the Lone Wolf replied slowly. "Yesterday I'd about decided we were riding a cold trail, but right now I'm thinking different." He looked up suddenly. "Will you let me have Hamilton Colyer's address, suh?" he requested.

Arnold Ray supplied it, from memory. Hatfield carefully jotted it down and stowed it away.

"Much obliged for everything, suh," he told Arnold Ray. "I figger you've helped a lot. Be seeing yuh soon. Wait for me till I come back," he requested Sheriff Chumley. "I want to see Irwin a minute."

"Anything happened here during the past two days?" Hatfield asked Irwin when he entered the latter's office.

"Nothing in particular," the oil magnate replied. "We got payroll money from Fowler this evening. We'll pay off tomorrow and the boys will lay off and go on a bust. Have you learned anything?"

"Considerable," Hatfield told him, "but not as much as I hope to soon."

He regaled Irwin with an account of his experiences the day before. Later he repeated the story to Sheriff Chumley.

"Tom Cragg figgers to bury the boys out at the ranch," he concluded. "They had no close kin folks, so far as he knows. I suppose you and Doc McChesney will want to ride down there and hold an inquest?"

"I reckon," Chumley replied gloomily, "but not tomorrer. I don't want to leave town. Anythin' may happen here tomorrer."

The sheriff would have been decidedly flabbergasted could he have foreseen what actually would happen "tomorrow."

About noon the following day, while the oil workers were still streaming in and out of the paymaster's office, a big herd of cattle rolled down Mocha's main street. A heavy step sounded outside Jason Irwin's office. Tom Cragg framed in the doorway and glared at the oil magnate.

"Want to buy some beef critters?" he demanded truculently.

Jason Irwin's jaw dropped. He stared at Cragg.

"Why—why—I—I—" he stuttered. Apparently bereft of speech, he turned toward Jim Hatfield, who was sitting with his chair tilted against the wall, the high heels of his boots hooked over the lowest rung. Hatfield's eyes were sunny as summer seas, the corners of his mouth were quirked upward.

"The boys will be needing a lot of steaks to hold down all the red-eye they're putting away today," he observed.

Jason Irwin turned back to Tom Cragg.

"It's a sale," he barked. "Top market prices. Cash on delivery at the yard."

He stood up, stocky and imposing.

"I'd sort of like to—shake hands on a bargain," he remarked almost diffidently.

TOM CRAGG stuck out a gnarled paw. The two old-timers shook vigorously, grinning into each other's lined, weatherbeaten faces.

"Suppose we amble out and have a drink on it, too?" Cragg suggested.

A little later, oil workers entering the Rio Grande saloon halted and stared in slack-jawed amazement at Tom Cragg and Jason Irwin standing at the bar together, glasses in hand, arguing with good humored vehemence over the advisability of drawing to try and fill an inside straight!

Hatfield wrote a carefully worded letter, addressing it to Hamilton Colyer, New York City, and signing it "James J. Hatfield, Lieutenant, Texas Rangers." He requested the answer be addressed to Sheriff Walsh Chumley. He mailed the letter and then strolled out to look the town over.

It was worth looking over, all right. The oil workers were in a hilarious mood. They had money in their pockets that ached to be spent, and they were wholeheartedly in favor of easing its pain as quickly as possible. Every saloon, dance hall and gambling joint was crowded. Shops and restaurants were doing a roaring business.

A babble of conversation poured from open windows and over the swinging doors. The click of gold pieces on the "mahogany," the cheerful chink of bottle necks on glass rims, the whirr of roulette wheels, the skipping chatter of dice across the green cloth, the silky whisper of shuffled cards and the thumping of boots on the dance floors blended in a gay tumult that increased and quickened as the afternoon wore on and the deep blue of the Texas sky changed to a kaleidoscope of color.

The fragrant aroma of cooking food and boiling coffee, the raw tang of spilled whisky, the comforting perfume of tobacco smoke and the exhilarating smell of burned powder was wafted on the clean air.

Brawny gentlemen with calloused hands and faces tanned to the color of old saddle leather were out in search of "wine, women and song." Wine, or its equivalent, they must have. Women they would like. And song they could put up with. Everything was laughter and good humor at the moment. But Jim Hatfield had had experience with such celebrations and knew that later on, when the snake juice began to bite, tempers would grow short, dispositions would sour and all perdition could easily bust loose on slight provocation.

Sheriff Chumley swore in more deputies, and swore at everything in general.

There was one alleviating factor that, Hatfield hoped, and believed, would tend to mitigate any serious disorder. The word had spread like wildfire that Jason Irwin, head of the great Eureka Oil Company, and old Tom Cragg, the admitted leader of the cattle raisers, had gotten together and appeared as thick as two horned toads under a bush. Men were saying that the whole business had been a mistake and that from now on the oilmen and the cowmen intended to pull together for the common good.

Hatfield was decidedly pleased with this particular turn of events. He had listened to the talk of the two old-timers for a while, which had finally gotten around to the very interesting and often hair raising experiences of their youth. He had left them putting away a huge meal together, their tongues still going as busily as their nether jaws.

"Those four boys down on the Cross C had to take the Big Jump to bring it about," he mused rather sadly, "but I've a notion they'll sleep the better from knowing they did a good chore."

About midnight, convinced that no serious trouble was in the offing, Hatfield decided to go to bed. He sauntered leisurely along the main street until he reached the narrow lane, with only the wan gleam from a lantern hung on a pole at the corner penetrating its depths. But as he approached the stable, he sensed movement amid the deeper shadow next its wall. Movement, and a quick gleam of shifted metal. He hurled himself sideward as two solider shadows loomed before him.

SOMETHING hissed through the air, he felt the burn of a knife blade that ripped his sleeve from shoulder to elbow. He struck out with all his strength, felt both fists connect solidly, heard a muffled curse. He leaped forward, arms swinging, tripped over the body of a man and sprawled against the stable wall.

From the darkness gushed a lance of flame. He felt a numbing shock. Lights blazed before his eyes. Instinctively, he drew his gun and shot at the flash. There was a yelp of pain, the thud of a falling object. He tried desperately to pull hammer a second time; but the six dropped from his nerveless fingers and he slid down the wall to the ground. Through the clammy waves of blackness that were sweeping over him, he dimly heard the patter of swift steps fading down the alley.

When Hatfield finally regained his senses, he knew he must have been unconscious for hours. His limbs were stiff, he was shaking with cold. He managed to struggle to a sitting position, fighting a wave of nausea that swept over him. His head ached abominably and there was a buzzing in his ears. Explorative fingertips found a slight nick at the hairline just above his right temple, which had oozed a few drops of blood.

"Slug grazed my head," he muttered. "Hit me hard enough wallop to knock me out, but didn't do any other damage, I reckon. An inch to the left and it would have been curtains."

For several moments he sat listening

intently. The alley was silent, and apparently deserted. He groped about, retrieved his fallen six, and holstered it. The silence continued, so he took a chance and struck a match. The tiny flare revealed no one in sight. A reflected gleam caught his eye and he saw an object lying in the dust nearly. It was a long-barreled forty-five. He picked it up and saw that one butt plate was missing.

"Knocked his iron out of his hand when I shot," Hatfield deduced. "Must have nicked his fingers, too, from the way he yelped. Well, it was a good try, and they mighty nigh got away with it. If I hadn't seen the glint of the blade when he hit out with his knife, the finish would have been different. Two of the hellions, all right, and they meant business."

He hesitated a moment, debating his next move, but finally decided that bed was the best place for him. He unlocked the stable door and made his way, a trifle unsteadily, up the stairs. Removing his outer clothing he tumbled into bed and wrapped up in the blankets. Soon he was warm again and quickly dropped off into a sound sleep.

The sun was shining brightly when he arose, and aside from a slight stiffness of his limbs, he felt none the worse for his near fatal experience of the night before. He dressed and headed for Irwin's office. The oil man was at his desk. Sheriff Chumley sat nearby, looking rather sleepy but in a tranquil frame of mind.

"Nothin' but the usual fights and pranks," he told the Ranger. "Nobody got killed or bad hurt, so far as I've been able to find out. Plenty of brawls, though. I saw Ace Givens eatin' his breakfast in the Rio Grande. He had a black eye and a split lip. Looked like he'd had a lively go with somebody."

"That's funny," observed Jason Irwin. "I saw Val Blake a little while ago. He had two black eyes, a swelled nose and a cut on his cheekbone, and his right hand was skinned up. Wonder if those two young roosters got together over something?"

"Could be," the sheriff admitted. "Mebbe they had a wring over that little red-headed gal who owns the Notched Seven, Mary Mason. I've a notion they're both sort of sweet on her."

Jim Hatfield said nothing, but the concentration furrow was deep between his brows as he rolled and lighted a cigarette.

An uneventful week passed. Everything appeared to be peaceful in the section for a change. New wells were brought in. Business was booming. Tom Cragg brought Carse Vibart in to see Jason Irwin and others of the oil operators. They smoked the pipe of peace together.

"Looks like yuh've done what everybody else has been tryin' to do for a year," Sheriff Chumley told Hatfield.

"But the chore isn't finished," the Ranger replied. "I've a bad feeling this is just a breathing spell. There's still a loose thread banging around. The bunch that has been kicking up all the ruckus hereabouts is not going to quit. They'll bust loose somewhere before long, or I'm a heap mistook. And I haven't much more notion who they are and who's running things than when I landed here."

AND then, early one morning, Chumley came hunting the Lone Wolf.

"That letter yuh been expectin' from New York is over to the office," he said excitedly. "Mebbe it'll tell us somethin'."

Hatfield accompanied the sheriff to the office, a glow in his green eyes. The letter said, in part:

> I am sure that the book in question was lost or mislaid through servant carelessness, doubtless in the course of dusting and assembling. The only person who had access to my library at the time, aside from my personal retinue, was one Valentine Blake, the son of my old friend Austin Blake of McMullen county, Texas, and he, of course, is above suspicion.

Without comment, Hatfield passed the letter to Chumley.

The sheriff read it, following the words with a blunt forefinger. He raised his eyes and stared at Hatfield.

"Well, I'll be cussed!" he exclaimed. "So that's the hellion! I never would have believed it. Come to think of it, he did make a trip over East about a year back. He's always chasin' around somewhere. Shall I drop a loop on the sidewinder?"

Hatfield slowly shook his head.

"We haven't a thing on him," he pointed out. "What if he was in New York and visited Hamilton Colyer? What

if we even knew for shore he stole the book from Colyer's library? We still wouldn't have a thing on him that would stand up in court. Suspicions, yes, but you don't hogtie a gent on suspicions. A good lawyer would make us look like dumb yearlin's. No, we'll have to wait until he cuts loose somehow again."

The sheriff nodded gloomily. "Uh-huh, I reckon all we can do is sit tight and wait for a break," he agreed.

"Or," Hatfield replied, "make a break."

"How?" the sheriff wanted to know.

"I can't say, right now," Hatfield admitted frankly, "but I've got a hunch, and I'm going to play it. That hombre must be sort of lathered up by now. Cragg and Irwin getting together must have tangled his twine for fair."

"Yuh figger he was after Cragg's land?"

"That's right," Hatfield nodded. "Guessing that he read that letter in the book and tumbled to what it might mean, he figgered right off that the old 'lower trail' was the trail the monk was referring to, and that San Cajo, the mountain that stands on Cragg's land, was the mountain holding the cave with the oil pool in it. I'm willing to bet a hatful of pesos he figgered wrong and doesn't know it. Meanwhile he must be rarin' and chargin' over the turn things have taken. Mebbe he'll go off half-cocked and give us the break we need. Meanwhile, I'm going to play my hunch."

CHAPTER XII

The "Old Trail"

THE dark hours before the dawn found the streets of Mocha silent and deserted, and it was at the hour when the false dawn flitted ghost-like across the sky that Jim Hatfield saddled Goldy and rode out of town. He rode south at a swift pace, following the trail that wound in the shadow of grim San Cajo Mountain.

"I got a hankering to find out where that track the wideloopers were following leads to," he told the big sorrel. "They were taking those cows somewhere, all right. Mebbe to a hideout they got down there some place. It looks like hole-in-the-wall country down there. Just the sort of region fitted to slide a herd into and hold it until there's a chance to dispose of it. I figger it's worth looking into, anyhow."

The sun was slanting up the eastern sky when he turned from the trail and made his way through the brush, following the route taken by the rustlers to reach the faint track that wound south by east across the rangeland. He passed the clearing where he had fought the owl-hoots, and saw grim mementoes of the encounter. The coyotes and the buzzards had been at work. White bones gleamed in the sunlight. Hatfield passed them by with scarcely a glance and continued along the brush and tree grown depression which undoubtedly had once been a trail that knew much travel.

Mile after mile he rode, with the hills to the southwest growing larger and larger, their craggy summits fanging the sun drenched sky. He was several miles from their lower slopes when the trail forked. The ancient depression continued into the southeast, but trending almost due south were signs of the recent passage of horses and cattle.

The south fork was little more than a gap in the growth, similar to many he had passed. Only the hawk eyes of the Lone Wolf, that missed no slightest detail, would have noted the faint hoof scarrings on the hard soil.

Hatfield pulled up. For some moments he hesitated.

"I've a notion, now, the hellions turned south when they got here," he told Goldy. "I've got a feeling, too, that there is something interesting somewhere along this old rut in the ground. The other can wait. Let's keep ambling the way we're headed, horse, and just see what we can see."

Nearer and nearer drew the range of hills. Soon Hatfield was riding in their shadow, for the ancient trail skirted their lower slopes. As he rode he studied the terrain with quickening interest.

Ahead and a little to one side suddenly loomed a low, brush covered mound that looked almost like an ancient burial barrow. Hatfield eyed it intently. His interest deepened to excitement as other sim-

ilar mounds hove into view from time to time.

"If those bumps aren't salt domes, I miss my guess," he remarked aloud. "And salt domes are one of the indications of petroleum deposits. This is getting interesting!"

A little later he hit upon another significant phenomenon. From under a cliff flanking the trail a small spring bubbled. Hatfield turned Goldy's nose toward the water. Then abruptly he pulled the sorrel up. He had noticed, on the side of a stone, just above the water line, an ominous frosting of white crystals.

"Doesn't look just like arsenic, but we're not taking any chances," he told Goldy. "Hold it, horse, till I have a look-see."

He dismounted, approached the spring and bent over it. He sniffed the water, dipped the tip of his finger into it and tasted it.

"Salt!" he exclaimed. "Salt as blazes! Salt domes! Salt springs! What next?"

Mounting, he continued along the track. Ahead loomed a higher hill than any he had yet observed. The trail, fainter and shallower than before, almost unnoticeable, headed straight for the hill, which was still some distance to the east, and curved around its base.

As he drew nearer, Hatfield's eyes fixed on a line of cliffs that swelled upward to the slopes of the "mountain." They were dark in color, seamed and cracked. At their foot lay heaped up masses of talus.

"Looks like they might have been hit by ligthning some time, long ago," the Lone Wolf mused. He rode closer, examining the fragments with kindling eyes.

"Shale!" he exclaimed. "Kerogen—oil bearing shale! Horse, I believe we've hit somethin' other folks have overlooked. Why did they, I wonder? All kinds of indications of oil."

FOR a while he was much puzzled to account for the discrepancy. Then the simple and obvious explanation occurred to him. There had never been any reason for looking for such things. Until old Zack Ray came along with his "witchin' stick," nobody in the section had given oil any thought.

In fact, it is seldom that cattlemen pay much mind to possible mineral deposits under their soil. They are interested in the surface—good grass, good water, shelter. Things advantageous to the raising of cattle. It was like the great Comstock silver lode in Nevada. Like the hills of silver of Tombstone, Arizona. Countless miners and prospectors tramped back and forth over both without ever suspecting the fortune they sought lay beneath their heedless feet. Here was a similar case, that was all.

"And I've a notion the cave the old monk wrote about is right around this hill somewheres," Hatfield told himself. "This hill isn't as tall or as bulky as San Cajo, but it's big enough for folks used to flat country to call it a mountain. And this track, which evidently leads to the Rio Grande, sooner or later, may have been more traveled back in those days, or at least plainer to see. I figger it's a heap older than the monks of the Missions, or even than the Spaniards who first landed in Texas. Made by Indians, originally, no doubt.

"And the monk used the expression, 'ancient trail.' Come to think on it, he would hardly have used such a term for the 'lower trail' from Laredo to San Antonio, that runs past San Cajo. That wasn't an old trail back in those days.

"Reckon when Blake stole the book from Colyer's library, he didn't think of that, any more than I thought of it, at first, or things might have worked out different. He had the 'lower trail' and San Cajo in mind. But I'll bet a peso this track is the old trail the monk traveled. Mebbe the cave he wrote about is back of that fall of the cliffs over there. That doesn't matter, though. I'm shore for certain now there was a cave hereabouts with an oil pool in it. The question now is, what to do about it?"

He studied the surrounding terrain. From remarks dropped by Sheriff Chumley, he felt sure the land was part of the Notched Seven spread, Mary Mason's holdings.

"And her ranchhouse had ought to be about ten miles to the north of here, and a little to the west," he mused. "Horse, I figger we'll pay Miss Mary a visit."

The sun was low in the west when Hatfield, after a long and devious ride across

the range, finally located the Notched Seven ranchhouse. The first persons his eyes rested on were two young punchers who had the run-in with Tom Cragg in Mocha. They recognized him and whooped a hilarious greeting. Mary Mason came out to see what all the noise was about, and welcomed Hatfield into the house.

"You are just in time for supper," she told him. "I'm awfully glad to see you."

The hands ate with their boss in the big kitchen, but after the meal was over, they departed for the bunkhouse. Hatfield remained with Mary. They adjourned to the living room, where he smoked in silence for some time, listening to the red-haired girl's vivacious talk. He noted, however, that her eyes were brooding from time to time.

"Ma'am," he said at length, "I've got a notion something is bothering you."

The blue eyes met his frankly.

"Yes," she admitted, "I'm worried—about Ace Givens."

"What's the matter with Givens?" Hatfield asked, interested.

"He had a fight with Val Blake, in town, the night of the oil workers' payday," she replied.

"Who won?"

"I'm afraid Blake did," Mary said. "He knocked Ace down—stunned him. Val has considerable of a reputation as a fighter, I've heard. He studied boxing, or so I've been told. I don't think Ace knows much about fighting—with his hands, anyhow."

HATFIELD nodded his understanding. It was seldom that the average cowhand knew much about using his hands in a fight. A wring was usually a tussle, with much wrestling and tugging and ineffective random blows.

"I got it out of Ace when I noticed his bruised face," the girl continued. "He wouldn't tell me what it was about, but I've a notion—"

She hesitated, coloring prettily. Hatfield chuckled.

"I've a notion I know, too, ma'am," he said, "so we'll just let it pass. Did Ace manage to hit Blake?"

"I don't think so," the girl replied. "He told me Blake hit him a couple of times and after that he didn't remember much of what else happened."

Hatfield nodded, a pleased expression in his green eyes.

"And how are other things going with you, ma'am?" he asked.

"Not too good," the girl replied. "I'm struggling along, since Dad died, but the ranch is mortgaged to the hilt, and the payments come around so fast. Dad was a good cattleman, but no business man, and he had a habit of indorsing notes for others. He could never say no to anybody in trouble."

"And he was left holding the bag," Hatfield nodded.

"I'm afraid that is so."

Hatfield smoked thoughtfully, for a moment.

"Mary," he said at length, "I'd like to ask something of you."

"I'll be glad to do anything I can for you," the girl replied.

"I want yuh to give me permission to drill a well on yore land," Hatfield said.

The girl regarded him with wide eyes.

"Why?" she asked. "Do you think there might be oil on the spread?"

"That's what I want to find out," Hatfield replied. "I'm sort of playing a hunch. I'll get Jason Irwin to do the drilling, and if anything comes of it, you and he can get together. He's a square shooter and will do the right thing. You can trust him to the limit. If he did make a strike, yore troubles would be over. Also, it may help me to find out somethin' I want to know mighty bad."

"All right," the girl agreed. "I don't see how it could do any harm, and besides, I'll be only too glad to do you a favor."

Hatfield stood up, his green eyes sunny. He smiled down at her from his great height.

"You may be doing somebody else a big favor, too," he said. "Somebody I've a notion you'd be glad to do most anything for."

"Who?" the girl asked wonderingly.

Hatfield continued to smile.

"A feller by the name of Ace Givens," he replied.

NEXT ISSUE

CRIMSON VENGEANCE

By JACKSON COLE

CHAPTER XIII

One Nervy Jigger

NOT more than two days later a train of loaded freight wagons rolled southward and turned from the "lower trail" onto the track that led to the Notched Seven ranch. With them rode Jim Hatfield and Jason Irwin.

Near the outcropping of kerogen shale Irwin set up his rig and built a camp. Soon the engine was chugging cheerfully, the great metal shod bit churning into the soil. Big Spike Jackson, who had transferred from the Lone Star Company to Irwin's Eureka, at Hatfield's suggestion, was in charge of operations.

"Indications look good," Irwin admitted, "but you never can tell for sure. Then there's always the question, if the reservoir under Ray's land hasn't drained off the reservoir here."

"It's possible," Hatfield agreed, "but I've a notion it isn't so. The terrain here is very little higher than the Ray location, and despite this upward swell here, the general trend of the slope is south. I'm of the opinion the drainage is only from the upper surface of the reservoir."

"If you happen to be right, we're apt to get a gusher that'll blow the tools and the derrick clean over that darned mountain," Irwin predicted.

Hatfield chuckled. "Let her come. See that big hollow over to the right? It's a made-to-order storage tank. You won't lose a drop of oil while you're getting the well capped. Let her blow!"

Hatfield had had a talk with Spike Jackson before leaving Mocha. In consequence of which Jackson had picked his men with unusual care.

"I got the fightin'est bunch of hellions in the field," he told the Ranger. "They're good shots, too, and they're all heeled."

"Keep on yore toes and yore eyes skun," Hatfield advised. "Of course, nothing may happen, but I've a notion a certain gent in the section is going to be sort of put out when he learns about the drilling going on over here. You can't afford to take any chances."

"We'll be ready," Jackson promised grimly. "I got a score to settle with that bunch."

Hatfield meanwhile had a chore to do. When he left the camp, the day after the rig was in operation, he followed the old track that wound through the brush pastures of the Notched Seven's southeast range. When he reached the spot where he had observed, on the occasion of his first ride, signs of horses and cattle having turned from the trail to the south, he likewise turned south.

He had not traveled south a score of yards when he pulled up with a sharp exclamation. A soft and more open patch of ground ahead was scored with fresh hoof prints, little more than twenty-four hours old, Hatfield judged. Sitting his sorrel, he stared at the evidence of the recent passage of a sizeable herd.

"Looks like the boys did a mite of business yesterday or the day before," he muttered.

He touched Goldy up and rode on, cautiously, every sense alert, ears attuned to the slightest sound, eyes scanning the terrain ahead. But the growth remained

[*Turn page*]

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silent and deserted, with the trail, really a track so slight that it could hardly be followed, were it not for the breakage sustained to the chaparral by the passage of the herd, winding south with a slight veering to the east.

Mile after mile, Hatfield rode, with the way veering still more to the east after it passed the southern tip of the hills. Nothing moved in the brush. There was no sound other than the chirruping of birds and the rustling of the leaves in a gentle wind. Then abruptly a clear metallic sound broke the silence—the sound of a locomotive's whistle blowing, no great distance ahead. The air quivered to a low rumbling that swiftly increased in depth and volume.

Hatfield quickened Goldy's pace. A moment later he rode through a final straggle of growth and saw the twin steel ribbons of a railroad line curving from the east to the south directly ahead. A long freight train was screeching its flanges around the curve, headed south. Paralleling the main line of the tracks were two long passing sidings, and a few hundred yards to the east was a small station.

HATFIELD pulled to a halt and stared in amazement. Straight for the railroad ran the tracks he had been following. And there they stopped. The ground along the siding was beaten and scarred by the churning of many hoofs. The Ranger let out a low whistle of utter astonishment. As the red and green markers of the caboose bobbed out of sight around the curve, he spoke to Goldy and rode on to the station.

An agent was on duty there, a cheerful individual who welcomed companionship.

"Light off, cowboy," he called. "Was just gettin' ready to have a bite to eat. Come on, there's plenty for two."

Hatfield was hungry, and accepted the invitation. The agent pulled a table into the middle of the room, peered anxiously into a pot bubbling on a little stove and, a moment later, proceeded to dish out two heaping plates of fragrant stew. He produced cups and saucers from a cupboard and poured steaming coffee.

Hatfield sat down in the chair proffered him. There followed a period of busy silence broken only by the clatter of knife and fork. At length the Ranger pushed back his plate and proceeded to roll a cigarette. The agent produced a black pipe and stuffed it with blacker tobacco.

"Looks like some cows have been run down this way of late," Hatfield observed casually through a veil of smoke.

"Yuh're darn right," the old agent replied, with a sprightly nod. "Business has been pickin' up hereabouts durin' the last few months. I'm thinkin' of askin' for a raise in wages. We've shipped half a dozen herds of beef critters from here of late. Seems there's a feller down to Corpus Cristo who will buy all that's sent him, and pay top market prices. Makes it nice for the ranch owners to the north of here. A short drive and their money ready for them when they deliver the cows."

"What's that feller in Corpus Cristo doing with so many cows?" Hatfield wanted to know. "I don't figger they could use so many down there."

"I understand he ships 'em out by water," the agent replied. "Got a market over East, I reckon. Anyhow he takes 'em and loads 'em on ships waitin' for 'em, or so I've been told."

"And the outfits to the north are sending him cows?"

"That's right. We've received critters from the Cross C, the Lazy V, and others."

"How come you have cars here for them?" Hatfield asked.

"Oh, we're notified in advance," the agent replied. "We run the cars up from Corpus Cristo and have 'em on the sidin'. Next mornin' the beefs show up and we load 'em. Only slipped up once, so far as I rec'lect. A big herd was supposed to come down from the Cross C a couple of weeks or so back, but early the next mornin', just before the string got in, a cowhand rode up, said he was the Cross C foreman and cancelled the order. He said the owner, feller by the name of Cragg, I believe, had changed his mind and was runnin' his critters north. Gettin' a better price up at Fowler, I reckon."

Hatfield nodded grimly. He understood better than did the agent the reason for that "cancellation" and why Tom Cragg's big shipping herd did not arrive at the wayside station.

"And those cows come from different

ranches," he remarked.

"That's right," agreed the agent. "Don't rec'lect seein' the same brand more'n once or twice. A different feller comes and makes the arrangements each time. Nope, I don't know any of 'em. I do remember, though, seein' a couple of the same fellers handlin' the loadin' of different shipments. Reckon mebbe they changed their jobs, or mebbe were just lendin' a hand to a neighbor."

"Uh-huh, 'lending a hand' to a neighbor, all right," Hatfield agreed, even more grimly than before.

"I'd like to have a look at the copies of the bills on those shipments," he said.

The agent stiffened slightly.

"'Gainst company rules to show such papers to any stranger who happens along," he demurred.

JIM HATFIELD nodded. He was fumbling at his belt. He laid the silver star of the Rangers on the table between them.

"I'm not exactly a stranger just ridin' along," he observed.

The agent stared at the star.

"Well, I'll be dadgummed!" he exclaimed. "Say, was there somethin' funny about them shipments?"

"So funny," Hatfield replied, "that the next time you get an order for cars on the siding, I want you to wire Sheriff Chumley at Mocha, pronto. I'll discuss the angle with you later. Now I want to see those bills."

The agent produced them, without further delay. Hatfield sheaved them over in his slim hands.

The papers proved to be in perfect order. They were signed with various signatures, for the Cross C, the Lazy V, and other spreads. The consignee each time was one, Malcom Sawyer, at Corpus Cristo.

Hatfield stared at the papers, utterly flabbergasted. The thing seemed fantastic. Widelooped cows brazenly driven to the railroad and shipped over it in the name of the ranch from which they were rustled!

"Of all the colossal nerve!" he muttered. "It just couldn't happen, but it did!"

Gradually he realized that the utter audacity of the scheme made it feasible. Sheriffs and other officials between Mocha and Laredo, and along the Border, had been cautioned to watch out for moving cattle, but who in blazes would think of notifying the railroad agents that the cows brought to their loading pens and shipped under their proper brands might be stolen property!

Despite his indignation, the Lone Wolf was forced to chuckle. The situation contained an element of grisly humor. Doubtless the consignee at Corpus Cristi, Malcolm Sawyer, had an outlet for the beef, perhaps south of the Border. Once the cows were on shipboard and out on the waters of the Gulf, tracing them would be well nigh impossible, and retrieving them even more difficult.

"Of course, the thieves couldn't keep it up," he told himself. "There would be bound to be a slip somewhere sooner or later. But for a while the thing would be darn near foolproof. Now I've seen everything!"

He studied the signatures on the copies of the various papers. Each was different in general appearance, but the keen eyes of the Lone Wolf detected certain similarities that convinced him they were the work of one man.

"And a darn good penman, too," he muttered. "Well, I was told that hellion has a good education. And he's got brains, too. Plenty of wrinkles on his horns. He's smart as a tree full of owls."

"You received a shipment yesterday morning?" he asked the agent suddenly.

"That's right, a purty big one. The critters, all fine, fat beefs, were branded Lazy V. That's the second shipment we've handled for the Lazy V in the past couple of months. See—here's the papers, signed for Carse Vibart, the owner, by his foreman, Isaac McCarty."

Hatfield happened to know that Vibart's foreman was named Isaac McCarty.

Hatfield debated his course of action. He might wire Corpus Cristo and have the mysterious Malcom Sawyer picked up, but after a moment of thought, he decided against it. Sawyer might be hard to locate, and a search for him might serve to warn the real prime mover in the business. Besides, even if Sawyer was arrested and induced to talk, he might not know over much.

"No, the only thing is to sit tight and

wait for a break—or make one," the Ranger told himself. "Now that I know just what is going on, it had ought to be easier."

He turned to the agent, gave him careful instructions relative to sending the message to Sheriff Chumley, and warned him of the necessity of silence.

"You're up against a bad bunch," he cautioned. "If they catch on to my visit here and our talk together, it might be too bad for you. When somebody shows up and orders cars placed on the siding, go right ahead with it as usual. Don't let him get suspicious."

The agent promised, and Hatfield felt his word could be relied on.

He said good-by to the old fellow and headed for Mocha at a fast pace. Arriving after dark, he found a deputy in charge of the sheriff's office.

"Chumley's out ridin'," the deputy explained. "He's chasin' that bunch who widelooped a herd of Carse Vibart's cows night before last. A big herd it was, all prime beef critters. The rustlers shot two nighthawks who were guarding the herd. Shot 'em from the bushes and plugged 'em dead center. Pore devils never had a chance."

Hatfield nodded, his face bleak.

"I'm going to bed," he told the deputy. "Have Chumley come and wake me the minute he gets in."

CHAPTER XIV

A Trap Is Set

IT WAS nearly morning when Sheriff Chumley pounded on the door of Hatfield's room. The sheriff was covered with gray dust. His face was lined and haggard, his eyes red-rimmed.

"Trailed the cattle thieves out onto the desert," he told the Ranger. "The wind was blowin' hard and kickin' up dust and sand and we lost the trail. Couldn't find hide or hair of the sidewinders, though we rode the desert for miles. They just seemed to evaporate. I sent a deputy on to warn Laredo and other places along the River."

Hatfield was not surprised the rustlers had given the sheriff the slip. He knew they must have doubled back from the desert under cover of the storm and headed east by south for the railroad.

"Made a false trail for you to follow," he explained to Chumley. In terse sentences he acquainted the sheriff with his discoveries at the railroad. Chumley swore in stupefied amazement.

"Yuh shore you didn't get filled up with Rio Grande snake juice and dream all that?" he demanded incredulously.

Hatfield smiled grimly.

"I know it sounds loco," he admitted, "but I didn't dream it. Well, mebbe it will give us the break we need. If the hellion tries it again, we'll tangle his twine for him proper. The agent will tip us off and we'll be there when he shows up with his shipment. I figger he is always with the bunch, but stays in the clear while the loading is going on. The only catch in the notion is that he may have figgered it's about time to drop this angle of the game. He's smart enough to know he can't hope to get by with it much longer. If he does that, he'll figger out something else."

"If we don't drop a loop on the sidewinder soon, he'll depopulate the whole region," the sheriff declared wrathfully. "He's a snake-blooded killer. He's as bad as John Wesley Hardin ever was."

"And," Hatfield added gravely, "he's got something Hardin never had—brains. We've got our work cut out for us, Chumley."

"I figger he'll lay low for a spell, anyhow," the sheriff predicted. "The district is hot right now. Folks will be watchin' their cows like hawks over a barnyard. I understand Irwin is bringin' his payroll money in next week with a guard of twenty men."

As the days passed, it began to look like Hatfield's surmise might be correct. Nothing happened. No word came from the agent.

"I figger he's layin' low for a spell," the sheriff repeated. "Mebbe he aims to quit operatin' hereabouts altogether. He must have made a purty sizeable pile in the last few months."

"Could be, but I don't think so," Hatfield admitted. "If he doesn't bust loose again soon, mebbe we can prod him a mite."

"Darned if I can see how," grumbled

the sheriff.

Hatfield smiled, but did not see fit to explain.

Meanwhile, drilling on the Notched Seven continued apace. Day after day the drill bit churned deeper and deeper into the ground. Jason Irwin finally began to grow pessimistic.

"We're getting almighty deep," he told Hatfield. "I'm beginning to wonder if the thing isn't a false hunch. We haven't hit anything that remotely resembles caprock, not even salt water."

"Keep driving," Hatfield told him. "Keep driving."

Irwin growled disgustedly, but he kept the rig at work. Spike Jackson, convinced that anything Jim Hatfield said could not be otherwise than gospel truth, kept his men on their toes.

And then, without preliminary warning, the well came in. The rig was chugging away monotonously one sunny afternoon when suddenly an ominous rumbling sounded from the depths of the earth. Jim Hatfield, who was standing nearby, let out a warning yell.

"Hightail!" he shouted. "She's going to blow!"

The drillers dropped their tools and fled wildly from the vicinity of the well.

The rumbling continued, increasing in volume until it was an earthshaking thunder. With a screeching bellow, the tools shot from the bore and high into the air. After them came a hissing black column driven with prodigious force, that soared up and up. Its crown spread out in a feathery plume. The derrick crashed over in splintered ruin. A cloudburst pattering of drops sounded on the leaves and the ground.

"A gusher!" howled Spike Jackson, dancing with excitement. "Look at her spout! I never seed nothin' like it. This is goin' to make the Ray field look like chicken feed."

JIM HATFIELD eyed the soaring column with quiet satisfaction.

"You're going to have trouble capping this one," he told Jason Irwin. "Lucky you got that hollow for a reservoir. Otherwise, you'd lose millions of gallons. As it is, you won't be out a drop."

For twenty-four hours, the well continued to spout oil with unabated vigor. By the time it was finally capped and the flow controlled, the great hollow was filled to the brim.

Mocha seethed with excitement over the new strike. The biggest ever, it was said.

"That little Mason gal is shore in luck," folks declared. "She shore aims to get rich in a hurry. Ace Givens is in luck, too. Irwin figgers the field extends under his land and is goin' to drill there."

Meanwhile things were otherwise quiet in the district. The payroll money, heavily guarded, reached Mocha without mishap. The oil workers had their usual payday bust and went back to work, broke and happy. Spread owners relaxed their vigilance. Cows grazed peacefully. Jason Irwin set up more rigs in the vicinity of the first strike and prepared to bring in more wells. Boring was also in progress on Ace Given's neighboring land. Other ranch owners, hopeful of cashing in on the general prosperity, hired drillers and equipment. A score of wildcat wells were in course of development. Even Tom Cragg and Carse Vibart were touched by the prevailing fever and tried a tentative bore or two, although Irwin and other experienced oil men expected no results outside the two wells that were already producing.

Sheriff Chumley was decidedly disgruntled. "The hellion has gone into his hole," he declared pessimistically to Hatfield. "He figgers the jig is up and don't aim to take no more chances."

"He might figger that way," Hatfield admitted, "but he is no longer alone in the business. He got together an outfit, and outfits of that sort have a habit of getting out of hand. The hombres who have been working with him have got used to easy money and plenty of it. About now I figger they'll be yankin' at the hackamore.

"Owlhoots very seldom hold onto the dinero they get. It's easy come, easy go. I figger that the outfit is pretty well busted. Blake will have to try something to keep them satisfied. He knows he's lost out on his big chance, but he's ended up as gents like that usually end up. He's got a bear by the tail and he can't let go, no matter how much he may want to."

But as the days passed, nothing happened to justify Hatfield's prediction. Val

Blake was frequently in town, his usual debonair self apparently unworried and content.

Like the other ranch owners, he was selling his surplus stock to the oil companies and making a good profit on every transaction.

And then one day, Hatfield rode to the Notched Seven ranchhouse and had an earnest talk with Mary Mason. Shortly afterward, the word got around that the Notched Seven hands were stripping the range of cows, combing the brakes and canyons, assembling a great herd on one of the southwest pastures.

"Mary Mason is goin' out of the cattle business," folks said. "She aims to round up all her stock and sell. Doesn't want to be bothered with ranchin' no more. No wonder. She's headed to be as rich as Arnold Ray, why should she worry her head over a few cows. Ray got out of ranchin', didn't he? Wouldn't be surprised if she sold the ranchin' rights of her place and went East. Her mother came from back East, yuh know, and all the kin folks she has are there."

The development of events tended to corroborate the opinion of the gossipers. Mary Mason appeared to care very little about the herd she was assembling. It was corralled on the distant pasture and left unguarded. And day by day it grew in size.

Jason Irwin intended buying it up when it was ready to trail, it was said.

Hatfield rode the oil fields as usual, but his rides were little more than pleasure jaunts. Everything was as smooth as a buttered snake. The drills chugged away. Pumping of producing wells minus pressure went on without interruption. The big new refinery was nearing completion. The contemplated railroad spur to Mocha from Fowler was a reality. Grading was already going on.

"Well, son, yuh shore quieted the section down," Sheriff Chumley told the Ranger. "Yuh got Cragg and Irwin and the others together and prevented a bad range war. Reckon yuh can sort of swell up over doin' a good chore."

"But I haven't finished it," Hatfield replied quietly. "The duty of the Texas Rangers is to promote law and order. But that duty also includes bringing lawbreakers to justice."

CHAPTER XV

Trail's End

ONE MORNING a cryptic message was ticked over the wires to Fowler, the railroad town to the north of Mocha. Under specific instructions, it was relayed to Sheriff Chumley with speed.

Hatfield translated the message. His green eyes glowed.

"Cars ordered for the siding down at that way station for tomorrer morning early," he told Chumley. "Here we go! I figgered the hellion couldn't resist that big unguarded herd down on the Notched Seven. Figgers to make a last big cleanup, the chances are. After that his outfit will bust up and scatter. That hoist engineer who came nigh to cashing me in by dropping a walking beam on my head, is among the missing already. I been keeping an eye on him, but today he wasn't on the job, and he wasn't in town anywhere, either. Blake is pulling his men off the job here. He may even leave the country, if he gets away with this last chore."

The sheriff tugged his mustache.

"How we goin' to work it?" he asked.

"Get the word to yore deputies," Hatfield directed. "Have them and the other possemen you've picked slide out of town by ones and twos. Irwin brings another payroll down from Fowler tomorrer. So you and I and three or four men will ride north to act as guard for the money. Let that drop where it will get around. Then we'll circle west through the hills by way of the old trail those hellions escaped by when they held up the Fowler stage. Okay, get moving."

An hour later, the fast stage for Fowler pulled out of Mocha. With it rode Jim Hatfield, as Jason Irwin's representative, Sheriff Walsh Chumley, and three deputies. Swaying and creaking, the stage rolled north, the horses of the armed guard pacing easily on either side.

"This should fool them proper," Hatfield told Chumley. "They're almost certain to be keeping tabs on yore movements. Now they'll figger you are out of the running for the night and they'll have

everything their own way. I'm playin' my hunch to the limit, and if everythin' goes right, we'll have the whole nest of sidewinders in the bag before this time tomorrer."

"It ain't goin' to be an easy chore, though," the sheriff predicted grimly. "I feel purty certain those hellions won't be taken without a fight. Not that I feel bad about that. It'll do me good to line sights with those hydrophobia skunks. I only hope Blake hisself gets in front of my gun muzzle."

"He's tricky," Hatfield replied. "We've got to keep our eyes skun or he'll slide through our fingers. One little slip is all he'll need."

When they reached the spot where the payroll holdup of a few weeks before took place, the stage continued on north. The sheriff and his posse then turned off, following the faint track of the ancient trail that wound west by south through the hills.

They rode fast, with loose rein, but the sun was low in the west when they arrived at the point where the track cut across the "lower trail" and continued east by south across the range. Here, concealed in the growth, the other posse members awaited them. With Jim Hatfield leading and pointing out the way, they rode through the gathering twilight. Soon it became so dark that progress was slow.

But not for long. A full moon soared up over the western hills and the range was flooded with silver light.

Hatfield breathed a sigh of relief when they at last reached the point where the route of the wideloopers branched from the old trail and headed south. A quick examination of the ground assured him that the herd had not yet passed that way.

"I figgered they'd wait till some time after dark to pull the wideloopin' chore," he remarked to Chumley, "and it looks like I figgered right. This will make it a heap better for us. If they were ahead of us, there'd be a good chance of them hearin' us coming, or, if a watchman was posted up the trail from the railroad, to sight us before we got there. If that happened, the chances are we'd get a lively reception, with the odds all in their favor."

HOWEVER, nothing untoward happened in the course of the swift ride through the growth. They sighted the railroad without mishap. This time the siding was not empty. A long line of cattle cars stood in position. They were dark and deserted, and all was quiet. A single light burned in the little station to show that the agent was on the job.

Hatfield decided not to risk a visit to the station. There was the barest chance that it was watched, although he did not think so. But he was taking no chances with his crafty opponent. Without venturing out into the moonlighted open, he led his men into position amid the brush that flanked the railroad line. The posse dismounted and took up posts where they could cover the siding.

There followed a long and tedious wait, with nerves strained to the breaking point. Hour after hour passed, and nothing happened. It was well past midnight when Hatfield whispered sharply for silence. Straining their ears the possemen heard, faint with distance, the protesting bellowing of weary, fast driven cattle. A few minutes later and they could distinguish the rumble of hoofs beating the ground and the swishing and crackling of the herd passing through the growth.

"Get set," the Lone Wolf whispered. "Here they come. Wait till they are all out in the open. They'll bunch when they begin loading. Then is our time to land on 'em like forty hen hawks on a squattin' quail."

On came the herd, rumbling and lowing. Soon dark shapes began bulging from the opening in the growth that marked the trail. With a thunder of hoofs the big herd charged into the open. With the cows came seven or eight men, guiding, directing. As Hatfield figured, they bunched the herd in the clearing beside the siding.

The weary cows willingly took advantage of the opportunity to rest. They began nosing the ground, cropping at the sparse grass. The riders came together, dismounted. They approached the cars to open the doors and fit the loading platforms into place. Busy in preparation of the task, they did not see the dark figures step from concealment and draw near.

Jim Hatfield was in the lead, his eyes cold, his face set in bleak lines. On his

broad breast gleamed the silver star of the Rangers. His voice rang out, shattering the stillness of the night: "In the name of the State of Texas, you are under arrest! Elevate! You're covered!"

With yelps of alarm, the owlhoots wheeled about. For an instant they were paralyzed with the suddenness of the onslaught. Then, howling curses, they went for their irons.

The guns of the possemen blazed fire. The air rocked to the reports. Spurts of flame answered from the owlhoot ranks. The screams of wounded men knifed through the crashing of the gunshots. The bellows of the terrified cattle added to the tumult.

Three men went down at the posse's first volley. A moment later a deputy pitched forward on his face. Jim Hatfield's guns thundered and a fourth outlaw fell. Three others dropped their weapons and howled for mercy.

Only Hatfield's keen eyes saw a figure somewhat in the rear of the others slide along the line of cars, cut sideways and streak into the bushes. Even as he wheeled about, guns ready, there sounded the beat of racing hoofs up the trail.

Hatfield dashed to his waiting horse. He flung himself into the saddle and sent Goldy charging into the opening in the brush. As the sorrel's irons rang on the surface of the trail, Hatfield sighted the fugitive, far in advance, mounted on a splendid roan horse and going like the wind. He recognized the slender, graceful figure of Val Blake. His voice rang out, urgent, compelling:

"Trail, Goldy! Trail!"

Instantly the great horse extended himself. His irons beat a drumroll of sound. His steely legs shot backward like pistons. He literally poured his long body over the ground. His glorious black mane tossing, slugging his head above the bit, his eyes rolling, his nostrils flaring red, he hurled himself after the flying roan.

But for once Goldy had about met his match. The roan was a magnificent animal, and he carried by fifty pounds, a much lighter weight.

AND GOLDY had already traveled far that day. Strive as he would, he could not close the distance, which was too great for anything like accurate shooting from the back of a racing horse.

Hatfield settled himself in the saddle and encouraged the sorrel with voice and hand. His steady eyes never left the form of Val Blake ahead.

For moments Blake would temporarily pass out of sight behind a concealing clump of growth, but always he came into view again, every detail of his figure outlined in the flooding moonlight. Once or twice his white face turned back toward Hatfield. And once he dropped his hand toward the butt of his gun.

"Try it, I hope you do!" the Lone Wolf muttered. "You'll throw yore cayuse off stride if yuh turn to start shootin', and that'll be all Goldy needs."

But Blake thought better of it. He faced to the front and devoted all his energies to getting the utmost from his speeding horse.

There was a chance, Hatfield knew, of him turning off into the brush in one of the brief intervals he was lost to his pursuer's sight, but the Ranger did not think Blake would risk it. He would know that the possemen would follow hot on Hatfield's course, and let him become entangled in the pathless chaparral, he would almost surely be surrounded and trapped.

"His best bet is the hills to the east," Hatfield told himself. "That's what he'll try for, I'll bet a peso. And," he admitted grimly, "he's got a chance of making it. I've a notion he's a mite more than holding his own. Trail, Goldy! Trail!"

They reached the point where the wide-looper's track joined the ancient trail. As Hatfield expected, Blake veered east along the trail. He gained somewhat, on the better going, before Hatfield could clear the growth. The Lone Wolf's face was grimmer than ever as he swerved Goldy east.

"If he makes the hills this far ahead of me he'll get in the clear sure as blazes," Hatfield told himself. "Chances are he knows those hills like he seems to know every foot of this region, and I don't. Trail, Goldy!"

With the white moonlight blazing down upon them, the pair raced on. The hills to the east were close now, fanging dark and mysterious against the star strewn sky.

The growth began to thin. It spaced out

to a straggle. Hatfield saw the kerogen shale cliffs directly ahead. A moment later and he sighted the gaunt webbing of the new derricks set somewhat to the north of the first well. Still farther north was the camp of the riggers and drillers.

Blake veered slightly to the south when he reached the open ground, doubtless intending to cut around the unclimbable cliffs. Directly in front of his speeding horse was a wide, darkly smooth surface where no bush grew.

Jim Hatfield, rising in his stirrups, saw what the frantic Blake did not observe—the glint of reflected moonlight on that strangely smooth surface. Instinctively he yelled a warning.

But Val Blake paid no heed. Straight for the great hollow, now filled with the thick, black oil, he charged. Hatfield saw his horse plunge downward as its front hoofs struck the yielding surface. He saw Blake hurtle over its head and far out through the air. He heard his body strike the oil with a thudding splash. Blake's shriek of terror and despair was knifed off short as the oil churned upward and he vanished into the black depths.

The oil surged sluggishly, then smoothed out, save for slow, ever widening ripples that glinted evilly as the moonlight struck their curving crests.

Blake's horse, twisting about as it fell, had managed to get its front legs over the rim of the pool. There it hung, unable to climb out, screaming its terror.

Hatfield moved with lightning speed. He jerked Goldy to a slithering halt, freed his sixty-foot rope and twirled a tight loop, and sent it snaking forward with an underhand throw. The loop settled over the straining horse's head and was instantly drawn tight. Hatfield took swift dallies around the saddle-horn, turned Goldy and walked him away from the pool. "Steady, feller," he cautioned the sorrel. "Don't want to bust his neck."

Planting his irons solidly, putting forth the whole of his mighty strength, Goldy drew the stricken horse up and forward until it could scramble onto firm ground. Hatfield halted the sorrel and eased off on the rope. He leaped to the ground, ran back and loosened the noose from the near strangled animal's neck. It stood motionless, legs wide spread, head hanging, breathing in hoarse gasps.

"You'll be okay in a minute, feller," Hatfield told it. "Get yore wind back."

Turning, he stood for a long moment staring at the dark and silent pool that was a grave.

CHAPTER XVI

Sunshine and Peace

CROWDS OF oil workers, who had been aroused from their slumbers by the thunder of hoofs and Blake's scream, came pouring forth from the shacks in all stages of undress. Hatfield recognized Spike Jackson in the lead and shouted an order. Soon cloths, soap and hot water were procurred and they went to work on the oil drenched horse. They were busy at this task when Sheriff Chumley and three deputies came racing up on foam flecked horses.

"Figgered he'd make for the hills," said the sheriff. "So we hightailed after yuh. Oil got him, eh? Well, he wanted oil. Wanted it bad enough to rob and murder for it. He ended up by gettin' more'n his share, I reckon."

Hatfield nodded, rolling a cigarette. "An awful way to take the Big Jump," he observed, "but he had it coming. How did things end up down at the railroad?"

"Okay," the sheriff replied. "I left two of the boys to keep an eye on the herd, includin' one that got a creased head in the ruckus—the station agent patched him up. The others are comin' along with the prisoners and the bodies of those hellions we cashed in. Didn't see any sense in the coroner havin' to ride way down here to hold an inquest. If he hankers to hold one, he can hold it at Mocha more comfortable. I told the boys to head for here. We can get a bite to eat from the oil workers and wait here till daylight."

An hour or so later, the possemen arrived with their charges. Hatfield examined the bodies of the dead men. One he recognized as the hoist engineer who had so very nearly succeeded in cashing him in the day after his arrival in Mocha. The others he did not recall.

"Border scum!" growled the sheriff.

"The sort we can get along without, all right. Those hellions we got roped up are willin' to talk on the chance of savin' their own necks. They've already told me where I can pick up a couple more that Blake had planted with the Eureka Company up in town to make trouble, among other things. It was them planted hellions who dynamited the refinery and set fire to the well. The rest of the outfit was hangin' around that night in case there was trouble. That was the bunch what had the run-in with the oil well guards, not Tom Cragg's men as I figgered."

"Uh-huh, that little incident was one of the things that caused me to believe first off that Cragg and his hands had nothing to do with what was going on," Hatfield observed.

"How's that?"

"Well, you'll remember," Hatfield recalled, "that when I met those hard ridin' gents right after their ruckus with the oil well guards, it was up where the trail to the west edges over the hill crest. Now it was reasonable to believe, if they'd been Cragg's men, they would have turned off south where the trail forks at the base of the hills, instead of riding west, a route that would put them some fifty miles out of the way to their home grounds."

"That makes sense," the sheriff said.

"Of course where they were heading for was the old trail by way of which they could get back to Blake's ranch and their hangout there," Hatfield explained.

THE sheriff nodded his aged head in agreement.

"Uh-huh," he said. "The prisoners told me they had one there, an old prospector's cabin in a canyon. Blake kept them away from his regular hands, who of course didn't know anything about what was goin' on."

"He was a smooth one, all right," Hatfield said with a nod. "When he read that passage in the old book in Colyer's library, he figgered right off what it meant. He knew something about oil, but not enough. If he had had a better knowledge of geology, he would have realized that there was hardly a chance of an oil deposit around San Cajo Mountain. Also, he should have realized that the monk would never have referred to the trail past San Cajo as an old trail, for the simple reason that in those days it was not an old trail, but a new one.

"Blake had always heard of the 'lower trail' as an old trail, and jumped to the conclusion it was the one the monk was talking about. San Cajo and all the ground around it is part of Tom Cragg's holdings. Blake figgered he had to get hold of Cragg's spread. He investigated Cragg's title, and learned what Jason Irwin later found out, that Cragg's title to his land is mighty shaky.

"Of course Blake wouldn't have had much chance of driving Cragg from his land by himself. He didn't have the money to buy up the title from the state, even if he had proved that the land was open range. With the oil companies controlled by Irwin it would have been another matter. Plenty of money there for court fights and to purchase the land.

"If Irwin had persisted in his fight on Cragg, he would have gotten Cragg's holdings. He could outbid Cragg when it came to a forced sale, which Blake couldn't do, at the time. Later, of course, Blake figgered to buy the land cheap from Irwin, with whom he was on friendly terms. Irwin would have been glad to sell to a man who had helped him out, after he had attained his objective and driven out Cragg who was supposed to be responsible for his trouble. He would have had no use for the cow ranch himself.

"Blake was getting money together by his widelooping and robbing with that end in view. No doubt he also had the idea that Cragg might be cashed in in the course of the row, which would have simplified matters for him. If necessary, he would have done for Cragg himself in order to get him out of the way. That was one thing that had me worried when Cragg and Irwin got together."

"Wouldn't put anythin' past the sidewinder," Chumley grunted.

Hatfield paused to roll and light a cigarette. For some moments he smoked thoughtfully, gazing at the sky that was whitening with the approach of day.

"Yes, yuh see, Cragg had no heirs, and if he happened to die, his ranch would be easy to buy," Hatfield added. "It's a wonder Blake didn't try that method first off."

"Cragg is the sort that takes a heap of killin'," the sheriff remarked.

"Yes, that's true," Hatfield agreed. "Also, in the beginning, anyhow, Blake may have been a mite squeamish about killing a man who had been his father's friend and who had known him since he was a child.

"Later on it would have been different. When once a feller starts riding the owlhoot trail, he usually goes whole hog, in time. After a while nothing counts with him except his own selfish desires. Blake was headed that way. He didn't kill the driver and guard of the stage when he robbed it, but he didn't hesitate, a little later, to shoot those Cross C cowboys from ambush."

"Uh-huh, plumb pizen," the sheriff said. "And plenty smooth, too. Got in with the oil people and made it look mighty like Cragg was responsible for the ruckus goin' on. I sort of leaned that way myself, for a spell. Later I had my eye on Ace Givens."

"So did I, for a considerable time," Hatfield admitted. "Givens was the logical suspect. A newcomer in the section, knew considerable about oil, according to Jason Irwin, arrived here right after the strike on the Ray land, never had much to say about himself. You'll rec'lect, also, Givens' Leanin' G was the only outfit in the section that didn't lose any cows."

"Folks had things to say about that," the sheriff recalled.

"Yes, Blake was careful to let the Leanin' G alone. He figgered suspicion could be thrown on Givens, too, that way. And nothing would have fitted into his plans better than to have gotten Givens into serious trouble. Not only would it have served to cover Blake up, but might have given him a clear trail with the girl, Mary Mason."

THE ELDERLY peace-officer could not repress a shudder.

"Plumb snake-blooded!" he said.

"And then," said Hatfield, "something happened to make me wonder if Givens and Blake might not be in cahoots."

"How's that?"

"The night two hellions tried to down me in the alley by the livery stable, I managed to land on both of them with my fists, and land almighty hard. Well, the very next morning both Blake and Givens showed up with black eyes and bruised faces. It shore looked funny. Also, Blake had a skinned hand, and I was shore when I busted the gun one feller used, with a slug, I also nicked his hand. But Givens got himself cleared of that."

"How?"

"Mary Mason told me Givens and Blake had a fight on payday night, the night I was near to drygulched. Givens got the worst of it, she admitted. He didn't manage to hit Blake even once before he was on the ground. That accounted for his black eye. But it didn't account for Blake's, and Blake had been hit the night before, all right."

"And Bill Barnes, Cragg's foreman, also had to get hisself suspected of the stage holdup because yuh busted his hand with a slug there in the Rio Grande saloon," chuckled the sheriff.

"Yes," Hatfield agreed. "Because the gent giving the orders during the holdup had a rag tied around his hand. Mebbe yuh can find out something about that from the prisoners."

"Already got it from the prisoners that Blake tied up his hand, put on a coat that made him look heavier, and talked in a different voice, hopin' he would make the guard and the driver think he was Barnes," the sheriff replied. "The hellion didn't miss a trick!"

"And then Barnes had to show up missin' the very day Cragg's herd was wide-looped and his riders killed," added Hatfield. "That had me wonderin', too."

"Everything seemed to play into the hellion's hands," Chumley declared.

Hatfield nodded. "If he hadn't made one of the little slips the owlhoot brand always makes, he might have gotten away with the whole thing. His bad slip was stealing the book from Colyer's library. He figgered there might be somethin' more of value in it, I reckon, and wanted time to study it carefully. Or he might have feared somebody else would read the passage and interpret its significance."

"Well, it all worked out in the end," said the sheriff, with a satisfied sigh. "As I reckon things usually do when the Lone Wolf is on the job. No wonder Bill Mc Dowell is so dadgummed proud of yuh. My deputies have been gogglin' at yuh

with their eyes bulgin' out like a squashed toad's ever since I told 'em yuh were the Lone Wolf. Yuh got a rep'tation, son."

Hatfield stood up, smiled.

"Well," he said, "It's daylight, and Spike Jackson is bellerin' 'chuck wagon!' Let's have ourselves some food, and then head for town. I want to be riding tomorrow, early. Captain Bill will have another little chore ready for me when I get back to the post."

When they arrived at Mocha, the first thing they heard was that a producing well had come in on Ace Given's land.

Hatfield was in the sheriff's office the following morning, saying good-by to Chumley and Jason Irwin, when Ace Givens himself hurried in.

"I hoped I'd find yuh before yuh got away, Hatfield," he said. "I want yuh to come over to the judge's office and act as best man at a weddin'. And, Sheriff, won't you give the bride away?"

After the ceremony, Hatfield stood for a moment looking about him with quiet satisfaction. He had come into the district to find it a turmoil of unrest, hatred and suspicion. He was leaving it peaceful as the golden sunshine streaming down from the blue of the Texas sky. He turned to Ace Givens and his pretty little wife.

"Hope to be seein' you both again some time," he said. "Until then, *adios*, or rather, *hasta luego*—till we meet again."

"So long, feller, and I shore do hope we'll meet again," said Ace Givens, while Mary voiced the old farewell with which the folk of Spain and Mexico speed the well-loved departing one on his way—"*usted vaya con Dios*—go you with God!"

They watched him ride away, tall and graceful a-top his great golden horse.

And Mary Givens, an inscrutable look in her blue eyes, and thinking, perhaps, of knightly Sir Galahad, whose strength was as the strength of ten, because his heart was pure, quoted softly lines from an old poem:

With stars and dreams behind him,
The morn light in his eyes,
He rides 'mid steel and roses,
Where the Last Adventure lies!

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Gun Trail

By

TOM PARSONS

Ranger Matt Lawrence finds you never can tell just how a horse thief's mind will work!

MATT LAWRENCE

FOR A LONG TIME Matt Lawrence had remained in the shadows, watching the cabin. He had been there from early afternoon until nightfall, just waiting. He had seen Tim Norton, the owner of the cabin, ride in off the range at sunset, and the way Tim had slumped in the saddle had told Lawrence the young rancher had done a hard day's work.

"Might as well get it over with," Lawrence decided as he rose to his feet. "No use waiting any longer."

Silently he moved closer to the cabin. The light gleaming through the window formed a yellow square on the ground. Lawrence drew close enough to peer in. Norton was stripped to the waist, washing himself in a granite basin, his shirt and gun-belt hung on pegs on the opposite wall.

Lawrence slipped over to the door and pushed it open, gun in hand. Norton dropped the towel with which he was drying his face and swung around. He stared at the big, dark-haired man in worn range clothes, and then his gaze centered on the gun.

"Holdup?" he asked quietly.

"Not exactly," Lawrence's voice was equally low. "Yuh're Tim Norton, ain't yuh?" Then, as the other man nodded: "I've been looking for you. I'm Matt Lawrence, Texas Ranger."

Norton lifted his eyebrows, for his visitor wore no badge. The Ranger stepped over to the wall, lifted the gun out of the holster on the peg and stuck it in his own belt. Taking the shirt off the hook he tossed it to the rancher.

"The nights get kind of cool," he remarked. "Better put it on."

"Thanks," Norton said drily. He put on the shirt. "Yuh mind if I ask why yuh're lookin' for me?"

"Yuh had another name down in the Pecos country," Lawrence said. Thrusting his gun back into holster, he dropped into a chair. "Farrell it was then, and that Farrell's wanted for killin'. Yuh shot a rancher in the back when he caught yuh stealin' one of his hosses."

"I'd be a fool to admit it, if it was true," Norton drawled. He sat down at the table in one corner of the room and began fiddling with a can of pepper. "Then yuh'd take me back and I wouldn't have a chance."

"I wouldn't try it," Lawrence said. He was staring steadily at the can of pepper. "If yuh threw that stuff in my eyes I wouldn't like it." He smiled faintly. "That's an old trick, Norton."

NORTON sighed and sat back in his chair, leaving the pepper can on the table.

"Suppose I told yuh I was framed," he

said. "That I was just startin' my own spread there, as I have here—but somebody wanted me out of the way?"

"Then I'd say yore actions in breaking jail and running away looked a heap like yuh was a guilty man," Lawrence told him. "And I'm afraid yuh'll have to go back with me."

"Reckon so," Norton spoke resignedly. "I was just goin' to start gettin' supper. What yuh say we eat before we go?"

"Suits me." The Ranger nodded. "Im hungry."

"When the hound is on the trail he don't stop to eat," Norton commented, his tone bitter.

"Mebbe so, mebbe not." Lawrence stared somberly at the younger man. "You hate the Law, don't yuh, Norton?"

"It hasn't give me much chance this time."

Norton got to his feet and started preparing the meal. Lawrence sat still, watching, and he didn't bother even to keep his hand close to the butt of his gun.

Neither man spoke for a time, then young Norton spoke shortly.

"All ready," he said. "Let's eat."

The Ranger moved his chair over to the table. He was hungry, as he had said. And the tired lines in his face made him look older than his years. The trail had been a long one, with many false leads, but he had finally found his man.

He had just poured a cup of coffee when abruptly a rifle barrel was thrust in through an open window of the cabin, and the door was flung open. A big, rough-looking man stood there, the Colt in his hand covering Lawrence and Norton.

"Evenin'. Norton," the man in the doorway said. "Got company, I see."

Lawrence glanced at Norton. He saw hate in his prisoner's eyes as the young rancher stared at the man at the door.

"Friend of mine, Ward," Norton said curtly. "What yuh want?"

"Just visitin'," said the man called Ward. "Seein' as this jasper is yore friend I reckon he must be another hoss thief."

Lawrence sipped his coffee and said nothing. If this Ward as well as the man with the rifle at the window were Norton's friends the odds were now three to one against the Ranger, but Matt Lawrence did not seem perturbed.

"Come on in, Doyle," Ward called to the man at the window. "We're all in the same boat, just a friendly bunch of hoss thieves." He looked intently at Lawrence as the man at the window disappeared. "Yuh had much experience with wide-loopin'?"

"About twenty years of it," Lawrence said, and went on eating.

THE man who had been outside walked into the cabin. He looked like a gorilla in range clothes, and there was a sullen expression on his ugly face.

"Guess we can talk business before him, eh?" Ward spoke to Norton as he nodded toward Lawrence. "Yuh figger it's safe?"

"All right with me." drawled Norton. "I told yuh we couldn't make a deal a dozen times before now."

"Figger yuh'll change yore mind about that now." Ward's tone was hard and menacing. "Yuh know a rancher up this way just missed a dozen young hosses he finished breakin' only last week."

"What's that got to do with me?" demanded Norton hotly.

"Signs say them hosses was driven here to yore place and probably disappeared out back of yore land over that malpais which don't ever leave no tracks." The man grinned. "Get the idea?"

"Sounds like yuh framed me," snapped Norton. "Made it look like I stole them hosses and brought 'em here to my spread."

"Shore looks like it, don't it?" Ward grinned broadly. "But here's somethin' yuh don't know. Nobody's found the tracks of them hosses leadin' here yet. If yuh was to let us drive stuff through this way all the time, yuh'd get a cut, and yuh wouldn't have to bother about them tracks. Me and Doyle would take care of that, pronto."

"I'm hungry." The man called Doyle spoke for the first time, staring at the table.

"Be quiet," ordered Ward impatiently. "Can't yuh see I'm talkin' business?"

"Yuh're always talkin'," grumbled Doyle. "And I'm still hungry."

"Then set down right here and have somethin' to eat, Doyle," invited the Ranger, rising from his chair. "There's plenty left."

Doyle eagerly went to the table. He leaned his rifle against the wall, sat

down in the chair Lawrence had vacated, and began to eat. Lawrence stood close beside him. All Ward's attention was for young Norton.

"What about it?" he demanded of the rancher.

"I told yuh I wouldn't do it, no matter how much yuh offered me!" Norton blazed. "And that still stands!"

Ward looked over at Lawrence. "As a hoss thief yoreself wouldn't yuh say this here Norton is a fool?" he asked, scowling. "He got in bad trouble down in the Pecos, and he ain't likely ever to get out." He laughed. "I know who done it down there, but Tim Norton can't get himself out of that one."

Lawrence spoke up quietly. "The last thing that rancher said before he died was 'Farrell downed me', and that was the name Norton used down in the Pecos. I happened to be down there at the time, and heard all about it. If Norton didn't kill that rancher, who did?"

"We done it," Doyle said boastfully. Apparently he was as dumb as he looked. "After we downed that rancher Ward he yells out, 'Yuh got him, Farrell!' " The gorillalike man looked proudly at his partner. "That was plumb smart of Ward."

"You fool!" snarled Ward, glaring. "And yuh said I talked too much!" The gun, still in his hand, came up to cover Lawrence and Norton. "Too bad, it has to be this way," he said, but he said it gloatingly.

"Meanin' just what?" Lawrence asked sharply.

"Why, me and Doyle trailed you two hoss thieves here to this here cabin," drawled Ward. "When we accused yuh of stealin' them Bar X broncs yuh both went for yore guns and we had to down yuh."

"An old trick, Norton, if yuh'll remember," Lawrence said.

"It shore is!" cried Norton. "And me not even wearin' a gun!"

The young rancher backed toward the table.

"Yuh forgot to ask my name, Ward," drawled Lawrence. "Folks might like to know that after yuh've downed us."

"Yeah." Ward nodded. "Who are yuh?"

"Matt Lawrence is the name," said the Ranger.

"Blazes!" exclaimed Ward. "Yuh're Lawrence, the Texas Ranger?"

Tim Norton's right hand suddenly rose, the pepper can in his fingers. In a swift gesture he flung the pepper into the big man's eyes. As the fiery little flakes blinded the owlhoot, Ward dropped his gun, with a howl of rage and pain.

Lawrence gave Doyle's chair a shove and the human gorilla went over backward. Before he could untangle himself from the broken chair Lawrence had grabbed Doyle's gun out of his holster.

"All right, Norton!" Lawrence snapped. "Get some rope and tie 'em up. I'll watch 'em."

Norton quickly obeyed, then got some water and a cloth and washed the pepper out of Ward's eyes. Lawrence stared somberly at the red-eyed man.

"I came up here to get the hombre who killed that rancher down in the Pecos," he said. "And I got him. So I'll be takin' a couple of prisoners back with me." The Ranger glanced at Norton. "Nice little spread yuh got here, Norton. In a year or so more yuh should have a right nice little ranch."

"Yuh mean I'm no longer wanted by the Law?" asked Tim Norton.

"Why should yuh be?" Lawrence shrugged. He reached into his belt and handed Norton his gun. "I just told yuh I got the men I was after, didn't I?"

Norton silently went to the peg on the wall. He got his gun-belt and buckled it on. He picked up his hat and put it on, then poured water on the fire in the iron stove.

"Goin' somewheres?" asked Lawrence.

Norton nodded. "I aim to help a Ranger take a couple of prisoners back down to the Pecos country." His smile was young and friendly and proud. "I'm sidin' the Law now, Matt Lawrence."

"Funny," said Lawrence, as he took the younger man's hand in a firm grip. "This is the first time I ever enjoyed huntin' a wanted man and findin' him. Let's go, Tim."

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A Complete Novelet

THE BLIZZARD AND THE BANKER

By JOSEPH CHADWICK

CHAPTER I

The Hard Winter

THE first summer had been bad enough. The homesteaders had toiled mightily to get rid of the tenacious carpet of grass, strained to break the virgin sod. Then, when the planting was done, the drought had come and baked the earth so hard it cracked open. What crops came up died half grown. But the winter, which later was to be called The Hard Winter, was even worse.

It struck the Dakota settlers like a vengeful enemy. It was a monstrous thing of howling wind, of blinding snow and bitter cold. Men saw their children and womenfolk shiver and turn blue, and grow gaunt from hunger. There was no saving what precious little livestock the

Schultz and Payson were taken by surprise

When Old Man Winter decides to get tough in the Dakotas he bars no holds—as banker John Loring finds when the Big Blow hits New Prospect!

farmers owned. And all this had to be endured. There was no way a man could fight back.

The first severe blizzard struck in mid-December, raged steadily for sixty hours, and then, when it let up, the temperature dropped to forty below zero. Two days later, the second blizzard came. It kept up like that through Christmas and on into the new year. Wind and snow and cold—and hunger. From the first big snow, no trains got through to the town-site, the shanty town of New Prospect.

The Big Blow came in early February and kept up for eight days. Three shanty-houses in the town were blown down and all but carried away, and only heaven knew what happened out on the open

prairies. But when the blow let up, a lone rider made his way into town. He was young Purd Martin, who had homesteaded a claim seven miles to the west, and he had bad news.

"The Jessups," Purd said, with frozen lips. "The wind took the roof off their soddy. They're dead."

The ill tidings circulated, came to John Loring. There in his bank, after closing time, he knelt by his safe and went through his papers until he found one bearing the signature, "Henry Jessup."

Loring closed and locked the safe, a small and ancient affair that four good men could have carried off, then slumped down in his desk chair. He stared dully at the paper for so long a time darkness crept into the bank. At last, Loring sighed and fumbled in his pocket for a match. He lighted a candle on his desk, for there no longer was coal oil for the lamps, and he held Henry Jessup's long-time note to the candle flame.

It burned quickly, a small thing compared to the affairs of some men. It was a mere promise to pay a loan of two hundred dollars, at interest long overdue. But now that it would never be paid off, it was to John Loring a matter of great importance. He dropped the flaming paper to the floor and ground it beneath his heel.

A big man, this John Loring. Forty-five years old, a touch of gray at each temple, distinguished looking, as a banker should be. Scant rations had thinned him down, rid him of a burdensome paunch. He'd been a jovial sort before hard times came; now there was worry in his eyes, for they saw the ruin facing him.

If this keeps up, he thought, I'll have to close the bank's doors.

And he knew that then the polite hostility of the town, which had been building up through the winter, would turn into open hatred for him.

He sighed again, in resignation, then shivered. The fire in the pot-bellied stove had gone out; the bank was an ice-house. John Loring put on hat and coat, woolen muffler and gloves. He snuffed out the candle flame, left his bank, locking the door.

THE bank was a frame building, but more solidly constructed than most of New Prospect's structures. Loring plodded through the snow and entered Wyland's Hotel and Saloon on the opposite side of the street. Half a dozen men were crowded around the stove that stood in the middle of the barroom. They wore their coats and hats even though the stove's sides glowed red. They looked around scowling as Loring's entrance let in a frigid blast. He slammed the door shut quickly enough, however, and so was not rebuked. He nodded to the men, saw the cold that was in the core of them—and their hunger.

He went to the bar. There was no one tending it, so he went behind it and poured himself a drink of brandy. He deposited a quarter in an almost empty till. He said, on second thought, "Drinks on me, gentlemen."

One man muttered, "On an empty stomach?"

Another growled, "Maybe that banker's belly doesn't get empty."

It was Harry Jennett talking. He was a lanky man with a swarthy face and bitter eyes. He was one of the town's two merchants, and now he had no food to sell, and no calls for any other merchandise. He put his back to the stove and eyed Loring in that sour way of his. Jennett was a man who hated easily, and was easy to hate.

"No call for such talk, Harry," John Loring said. "I've had nothing to eat since early this morning, and then it was only seed wheat put through a coffee grinder and cooked with water. I'll have the same fare for supper."

"Good enough for you, banker!"

"I'm not complaining, Harry."

"No, damn you!" Jennett retorted. "You brought it on yourself. Last November I asked you for a five-thousand-dollar loan to stock my store and you turned me down. If I could have brought in that much supplies, people wouldn't be so hungry now!"

"You weren't a good risk, Harry," Loring said patiently. "I already hold too many of your short-time notes. You're a gambler at heart, and you lost some of the money you got from my bank over the card table right here in this room. Besides, when you asked for that loan in November, you said nothing about stocking more food. You talked about stocking

farm implements."

Jennett said, "That's a lie Loring," but he spoke with no spirit, and the other men knew that the lie was his.

Stace Wyland came down from upstairs, a tall and handsome man with dark hair and metal-gray eyes. He had the pallor of an indoor man; he dressed with care, in the style of professional gamblers. He had meat on him, and he was vigorous. The food situation had not bothered Stace Wyland much. Early in the winter, he had bought up, with cash and some of Harry Jennett's IOU's, at least half of Jennett's stock of food.

Banker Loring eyed Wyland with grudging respect. The gambler-saloonman had foreseen the hard winter. And he was a man who took chances. Wyland had set himself up in business because he, like John Loring and others, had believed that New Prospect would be the division headquarters of the new railroad.

That would have meant, had it become an actuality, that the railroad shops and numerous workmen would come to the town. Wyland had gambled and lost, for the railroad was passing New Prospect up except for a station. But the man was sitting the winter out, knowing he would make a killing when construction work on the road would begin again in the spring when the thousands of track-workers returned.

Now, Wyland said brusquely, "If you two have got something to settle, take it outside. I'm in no mood for a brawl here."

Loring said, "It's forgotten."

Harry Jennett said nothing at all. His gaze fell away from the banker, who now came from behind the bar.

Loring sipped his brandy. It spread a false warmth through him almost at once, but, since he was hungry, it also made him feel giddy. He leaned back against the bar, hating to go to his cold rooms over the bank. He watched Stace Wyland feed more wood into the stove. That was something else the saloon-owner had plenty of; he was burning lumber straight from Craley's yard, having bought it up months before. And lumber in a settlement on the all but treeless Dakota plains ran into money. Wyland not only knew how to make money; he also knew how to spend it. Most people were keeping their fires by burning hay twisted laboriously into tight wads.

Three other townsmen came in, joining the others around the stove. There was some talk in dull voices: "Hear about the Jessups? Too bad." The cold was discussed, the chances of another terrible blizzard, and finally, as always with hungry people, the men talked about food. They even tormented themselves by telling of their favorite dishes, going so far as to explain their preparation.

IN THE midst of their conversation Bonnie Hanlon appeared, her high heels tapping as she came down the stairs. John Loring turned his head to watch her. Perhaps it was partly the brandy, but he suddenly forgot that he was cold and hungry. For a long time now, ever since she had come to New Prospect eight months ago, John Loring had found watching Bonnie Hanlon a pleasant pastime.

She was not young, compared to what men called young in a woman, but, even in her middle thirties, Bonnie clung to the bloom of youth. She had cameo-perfect features, clear and steady gray eyes, a full and seemingly inviting mouth. She was thinner than she had been in the summer, but still her beauty, of face and figure, was undiminished.

The town believed in the beginning, when Bonnie came to deal faro in Wyland's place, that she was his woman. Loring had tried not to think of it, one way or another, but he had come to realize that Bonnie Hanlon was nobody's woman. Now she caught his eyes on her, and gave him a smile that was somehow mocking. It was as though she knew that he found her worth watching, and considered it amusing.

She crossed to him. "Do bankers mind this cold, Mr. Loring?" she asked. "Or does money keep them warm?"

"Money can be a pretty useless thing, sometimes, Bonnie."

"That, coming from a banker!" she exclaimed, in mock surprise. "You know," she added, "I'd hate the cold and the snow a lot more except for the fact that everyone—rich and poor, banker and gambler and rancher, suffer the same way. Or don't you agree that they do, Mr. Loring?"

Loring smiled, not quite sure why she

was bantering him. He said, "I'm beginning to think there's little difference between a banker and a gambler, Bonnie."

"But one has respectability."

"That's a matter of opinion," Loring said. He saw Stace Wyland watching him and the woman; Wyland was frowning as he puffed on a cigar. Loring added, "Besides, a banker is considered respectable only when his institution is solvent. With things as they are, who can tell when my gambling—and it is that—may clean me out?"

Bonnie's smile faded. "You don't mean, John—?"

She got no farther. The door slammed open and a gust of wind swirled a sifting of powdery snow into the saloon. Stace Wyland growled, "Dammit! Hurry up and close that door!"

Loring saw a sudden alertness come to the men around the stove. He noticed that Wyland grabbed the cigar from his mouth—and looked as though he wished he hadn't talked up. And Bonnie was staring. She whispered, "It's Jack Mundy!"

Loring swung around then, eager to see the man who could shock so many people—just by opening a door and not even speaking. It was his first glimpse of the outlaw, Black Jack Mundy.

CHAPTER II

The Outlaw from Willow Creek

LORING felt disappointed, for Black Jack Mundy didn't make much of an appearance. A short, stocky young fellow with a shock of yellow hair dangling from under his broad-brimmed hat. He was fair-skinned, and the cold had his face whipped red. His eyes were a baby blue. Loring wondered vaguely why such a man should be called Black Jack. But there was something in Jack Mundy's manner that made Loring study him.

It was a jaunty manner, a reckless devil-may-care air. Jack ignored Stace Wyland's order; he came into the barroom letting the door stand wide open. Wyland hurried to close it. The outlaw wore high-heeled boots mounted with Mexican spurs. He was wrapped in a coat cut from tarp canvas and lined with piecings from a woolen Army blanket.

He unbuttoned his coat, patted the six-gun holstered at his thigh. "There's a reward for me, gents," he said loudly, mockingly. "The railroad figures I held up one of its trains a couple months back, and it'll pay a thousand dollars for me—dead or alive. But don't anybody get any notions that bounty-money'll be easy to collect."

Still grinning, he backed to the bar.

"Been holed up in a sod hut out on Willow Creek," he went on. "Lonely as hell. Got sick of my own company, so I figured I'd ride in and paint this town red." He shot Stace Wyland a look. "I put my horse up in that barn of yours out back, Wyland. That'll be all right with you, I reckon, since I'll be spending money."

He took a ten-dollar gold piece from his pocket and put it on the bar. "Drinks on me, gents," he invited. "And for the lady, too."

Nobody moved.

"What's the trouble?" Jack demanded. "Ain't I good enough to drink with?"

Loring said, "It's not that, friend. Hungry men don't drink."

"Hungry? Why now, I've been living off the fat of the land."

"You'll go hungry here, friend."

Jack looked Loring up and down, and said, "Who says we're friends, mister? I don't know you."

"My name's John Loring. I'm the town's banker."

"The banker, eh? Maybe we should be friends. Maybe one day I'll pay your bank a friendly visit—Mister Loring."

Loring gave him a thin smile. "Don't try it, Jack," he said. "I always keep a loaded shotgun handy. And I could be pretty quick with it."

The door swung open again, before Jack Mundy could reply to that, and the man who came staggering in carried, to everyone's amazement, a shotgun. He kicked the door shut and came but two steps forward. It was Jeb Watts, the carpenter, who was known as a good workman and a sober citizen. But now he looked wilder than Black Jack Mundy had ever looked. His cold-blued lips moved, but at first no words came. Loring stepped over to him, asking, "What's

wrong, Jeb?"

"My cow—stolen!" Watts finally gasped. "Some dirty son stole my cow—and now my baby's crying her heart out for milk!" He stared about, looking at each person in turn as though trying to find guilt on one face. "I swear it—I'll kill the man who did it!"

Loring felt suddenly sick in his thoughts. He knew what had happened; at least, he could guess the truth. Some famished man had crept into Watts's lean-to barn and taken the cow with the intent to butcher it for meat. And Watts's six-month-old baby, whose mother had died giving it life, was not considered by the thief. Jeb Watts's wildness was understandable. He would not be able to obtain milk from another source for love or money.

"Who did it?" the carpenter demanded, yelling it. "Who stole my cow?"

Loring said, "Nobody here, Jeb. Come along, I'll help you look. Maybe we can find the critter before it's killed."

He took hold of the man's arm, turned him to the door, telling himself that he would get the shotgun away as soon as possible.

JACK MUNDY came over, and said, "You mean to say folks here are that hard up?"

"It's worse than I can tell you," Loring replied.

He opened the door and pushed Jeb Watts out. Jack Mundy came after them, an odd look of concentration on his blunt face. The three of them went to Watts's small house at the north end of the street. It was unpainted, but well built, and the mournful cry of the hungry baby came from within. As they walked around back, Loring glanced through one of the partially ice-covered windows. The kitchen was lit by candles. Watts's twelve-year-old daughter was sitting by the stove, rocking the baby. Jack Mundy too had looked. He muttered an oath and said, "And all that grub I've got at my soddie!"

There was nothing to see in Watts's little barn. There was hay piled high for the cow that was gone. The stall was certainly empty. Watts said he figured the cow was taken shortly after dark, maybe an hour ago. Jack Mundy prowled through the snow drifted about the barn, and finally said, "Your cow went this way, mister—east."

In the darkness, Loring could barely see the marks in the powdery snow, but he felt sure that Black Jack Mundy knew what he was talking about. He said, "You wait with your children, Jeb. Jack and I will bring your cow back."

Watts argued that he would go along and use his shotgun on the cowthief, but finally Loring made him listen to reason. Jack Mundy led the banker to the railroad tracks, and east along them. The wind blew in gusts, sweeping up clouds of snow. It was cold.

John Loring was cold to the marrow of his bones. There was a sharp hunger ache in his belly. His strength wasn't good; he kept stumbling.

He asked, finally, "How much farther, Jack?"

Jack Mundy replied, a laugh in his voice, "Not much. I see a fire ahead. And I hear that blamed cow bawling. You know, Loring; down in the Panhandle where I come from, there's more cow critters than a thousand hombres can count. It gives me a chuckle, out hunting one lonesome cow."

"Yeah," said Loring. "A funny chore for an outlaw."

"Ain't it, though? Quiet, now!"

The fire patched the darkness with a bright glow that revealed a shanty, an abandoned railroad tool shed, and a man feeding twisted hay into the flames. A second man held a rope, and the rope held the Watts cow. Loring recognized the two men, Ike Payson and Dutch Schultz. They had worked as track-layers until winter had set in, then had squatted here. They came into town frequently, drank heavily, quarreled with each other and with the townsmen when drunk. They were a couple of ugly customers.

Jack Mundy drew his six-gun, then flung his laughing voice at the pair: "Stand where you are, hombres. Black Jack Mundy talking!"

The hardcase by the fire, Dutch Schultz, uttered a startled oath. Ike Payson grunted and let loose of the cow's rope. Surprised though they were, neither man could be frightened by the name Black Jack Mundy. They grabbed for their guns.

CHAPTER III

Bad News for Bounty Hunters

JACK MUNDY took his time. He let them get their six-guns out before he fired. He shot at Dutch Schultz first, and the hardcase howled. He dropped his gun, grabbed at his left side with both hands, and went to his knees. The outlaw shot at Payson next, but missed. But the thief must have heard the whine of the slug. He dropped his weapon without firing, and flung his hands high.

"Don't kill me, Mundy! I give up!" he yelled.

Jack Mundy said, "Go get their guns, Banker."

Loring obeyed. He thrust the two six-guns into the pockets of his overcoat, then caught up the cow's lead-rope. The critter was gentle enough, but, needing to be milked, it kept bawling. Jack Mundy came up, not smiling now.

"You no-good sons try to steal a baby's milk again," he said, "I'll gut-shoot you, sure. Let's go, Loring."

Dutch Schultz was still on his knees, hands pressed to his left side. He had a matted black beard, and he was whimpering through it. Ike Payson said nothing—in words. But his beady eyes told John Loring that this wouldn't end here. Ike Payson wasn't a man to forget.

Banker, outlaw and cow headed back along the roadbed. It was a long, cold mile to town. On the way, Loring threw the two six-guns into a snowdrift. At the edge of town, he gave Jack Mundy the lead-rope.

"You return her, Jack," he said. "I've got to find some supper. Haven't eaten since early this morning. I'm weak in the knees."

"This whole town starving?"

"All but Stace Wyland, and maybe the two storekeepers."

"Kids like Watts's?"

"Must be fifty hungry kids here, Jack."

Jack Mundy swore softly. "Well, I'll get this cow-critter back where it belongs. Then I'm going to drink up that ten-dollar gold piece I left on Wyland's bar. S'long, banker."

He started toward the Watts house, but Loring stopped him by saying, "Watch yourself in town, Jack. I'd hate to see you end up like outlaws always end up. We've got no lawman here in New Prospect, but a thousand-dollar reward offer might turn a lot of men into bounty-hunters."

Jack laughed. "That's funny talk, for a banker. Tell you what, Loring; I'll see you in the morning. I'll come to your bank. But don't you go grabbing for your shotgun when I open the door."

"All right, Jack," Loring said.

The banker followed the telegraph poles up to the box-sized railroad station.

Bald, little Herb Lane was telegrapher at New Prospect. As Loring passed the station, he heard Herb pounding his key. Loring was surprised, for with every blizzard the wire went dead and usually stayed dead for a week or more. Evidently repairs had been made quickly, after the Big Blow. Loring turned into the station, curious to learn if there was news of a train getting through. Herb looked up and nodded. He was listening to the clattering instrument, writing down the message coming through. Loring went to the stove and stuffed in a few bunches of hay. Almost at once, the instrument went silent.

"Train coming through, Herb?"

"Nope. No such luck," the telegrapher said. "They've got an engine and a snowplow embedded in solid ice just west of Leeds. There's no chance of a train getting through until there's a big thaw."

He rose and came to the stove, holding a message in his hand. "Shouldn't show this to anybody, I guess," he went on, "but I don't like the looks of it. Something queer is going on between Stace Wyland and J. P. Fleming, the division superintendent."

Loring took the paper and held it to the lamp. There were just three words, PLACE YOUR BETS. The message was addressed to Stace Wyland and signed, "Smith."

Loring handed back the message, and said, "What makes you think Fleming sent it, Herb?"

"That Smith signature doesn't fool me," Herb replied. "Just before the Big Blow Wyland sent a wire to J. P. Fleming at Leeds. I never knew him to telegraph anybody else. His message read, 'Time

short. Urgent I know how to place bets.' Now a reply comes, 'Place your bets.' It sure didn't come from a man named Smith. J. P. Fleming is trying to cover up for himself for some reason."

"Some wager they've got on, maybe."

"Some deal, I'd say."

"What kind of a deal, Herb?"

THE telegraph operator gave the banker an amused grin. "A man running a bank should be able to figure that out, John," he said. "Of course I can be wrong. But it looks to me as though Wyland and Fleming are in cahoots. Wyland's already got a stake in this town. Like everybody, he figured New Prospect would be the railroad's division headquarters."

Loring broke in, "But it was a false report. The road's already built a mile beyond town. The shops and roundhouse are to be constructed thirty miles west, according to the last reports."

"Suppose the bigwigs changed their plans," Herb said. "The shops and roundhouse could still be built here. And Fleming might be the man who got the bigwigs to change their minds. Now, working with Stace Wyland, he may be getting ready to cut a melon."

Loring nodded, and said, "I get it, Herb," and the two of them fell silent. But the banker's mind was racing. The building of railroad shops at New Prospect would mean that several hundred jobs would be created, and that a steady flow of money, in wages, would come to the town.

Business would boom. The nearby farmers, on the verge of ruin, would have a close market for their crops. New Prospect instead of dying, as had seemed a certainty, would take on a new lease on life. The business places would prosper, and new ones would open up. Loring's own bank would certainly flourish.

Stace Wyland knew all that. And for some reason of his own, he was working with J. P. Fleming to keep secret the new decision to bring division headquarters to the town. As Herb Lane had said, a banker should be able to understand the Wyland-Fleming game. Wyland would now "place his bets." He would make investments.

He would buy up town properties, and he'd be able to buy them up for a song, the way things were at the moment. Later, when the new railroad plans became publicly known, the same properties would skyrocket in value. And Wyland, with his secret partner, J. P. Fleming, would have made themselves rich men. The people who had sold out would be the losers.

"Herb, if we've guessed right, we can't let them get away with this," Loring said. "It's a blackleg scheme."

"If word leaks out," Herb said worriedly, "Wyland and Fleming will know I was the one who caught on—and I'll lose my job."

Loring nodded to that. "I'll think of some way to protect you, Herb," he assured the man. "I'll sleep on it tonight, and by morning know what to do. Good night, Herb."

The town under its burden of snow looked different when John Loring left the station. The difference, of course, was in his own mind. The severe winter had convinced him that New Prospect had no future, that it was doomed to wither on the vine. There would be settlers leaving their homesteads when the weather opened; for only the hardiest souls would stay on in such a land.

Some of the townspeople would leave; some had been talking all winter of quitting the town for good. But at last there was a ray of hope. And the town, with its unpainted shanty-houses and few false-fronted business places, looked better to John Loring's banker's mind.

He had trained for his profession back East, and he knew how prosperous a farming and industrial community could become. New Prospect had the farms, and if it got the railroad shops— Yes, it looked different to John Loring tonight. He suddenly realized that he had some love for the little place. He wanted to stay here and grow with the town, and help it grow. But he didn't want to see the better part of it owned by Stace Wyland.

He reached Wyland's hotel-saloon, looked in through one of the frost-blurred windows. Black Jack Mundy was at the bar, drinking and talking to the men grouped around the stove—no doubt boasting of how he had recovered the Watts cow in a gun-fight with Ike Payson and Dutch Schultz. Stace Wyland was

behind the bar, puffing on a cigar. Bonnie Hanlon sat on a chair in a corner, huddled in her fur coat.

Loring turned away, crossed the street, climbed the ice-coated outside steps to the door of his living quarters.

Inside, he lighted a candle and started a fire in the stove. He rummaged around in the cupboard, found only a little flour and a few beans and some ground seed wheat. With these he cooked a scanty meal. But he was more concerned now with finding a way to stop Stace Wyland from placing his bets. It wouldn't be easy, even when news got out that the railroad had changed its plans. Most of the townspeople would jump at any offer to sell out—dirt cheap.

No, it wouldn't be as easy as recovering a stolen cow!

CHAPTER IV

Owlhoot Grubpile

WHEN Loring opened his bank in the morning, he still did not know how to stop Stace Wyland. With Herb Lane's job at stake, Loring could not go about and advise the townspeople to hold on to their properties—with the promise that New Prospect would get the railroad shops, after all. Wyland would know where he got the information.

But Loring had plenty of time to keep thinking about the matter. Business was at a standstill, and he was idle when Les Harper came in.

Harper said, "Clear sky. No snow today," as he came up to the grilled window. He was owner of the store that was Harry Jennett's competitor. Unlike Jennett, he did not go about sour faced. But today Les Harper was worried. He asked to renew a note which was due; he could pay the interest, but explained that he was unable to reduce the principal.

"I'm hard up, John," he told the banker. "I came here with six hundred dollars in cash and a thousand dollars worth of stock. Now I'm in debt for twenty-four hundred dollars, to you. And my stock isn't worth a thousand, any more."

"Stick it out, Les," Loring said. "I'm not pushing you."

"I hate to leave you holding the bag," Harper went on, "but I've been thinking of closing up. Come spring, this town will be on the rocks. Too many folks planning to move out."

"Things will change, Les."

"Not here," Harper stated. "I can't see it."

"You have my word for it," Loring said, but wasn't sure, when the merchant left, that Les Harper had any faith in his word.

Stace Wyland came in next. Loring was surprised to see the saloonman, for Wyland did his banking in a safe in his own office. Wyland, however, had not come on ordinary business. He asked if Loring had time to discuss a deal. Loring nodded and invited him back of the partition that divided the room. Loring sat behind his desk, and Wyland took a chair beside him. He gave the banker a cigar, lighted it and one for himself. His face was unreadable, but his metallic eyes seemed bright with excitement. And Loring thought, "He's ready to place his bets."

Wyland said, "No use to beat around the bush, Loring. I want to buy you out. You've not had a successful year, here in New Prospect, and your chances of keeping your bank open grow slimmer every day. I'll pay you five thousand dollars for your bank—building and business."

"Why, Stace?"

"I like to gamble."

"On what, if you're so sure I'm facing a bank failure?"

"I'll make a killing with my place during the spring and summer, when the construction crews come back to work," Wyland said blandly. "For a few months, this town will look like its booming. And I'll unload this bank at a big profit."

"I could do the same, Stace."

"Not if you have to close your door, which is likely. I can keep open with the money I make at my bar and gambling places. Besides, I happen to have plenty of cash on hand."

Loring puffed on the cigar Wyland had given him, and it was a good one. He was as bland, with as much of a poker face, as the saloonman. But anger was rising in him. He had to fight down an impulse to seize Stace Wyland and throw him out into the street. The man's scheme was

clear enough; Wyland hoped to get hold of the bank for a steal-price, and, through the bank's paper, control town and countryside.

In such fashion, Wyland would be able to grab every local business and almost every farm. Loring thought, "He'd demand payment on all those over-due notes. When payment wasn't made, he'd take over the properties. Wyland wouldn't be gambling. His speculating would be without the element of risk. It couldn't fail. Once he'd taken over the properties, they could be put up for sale at skyrocketed prices to a new bunch of settlers.

Loring said, "Stace, you wouldn't have an idea that the railroad was planning to have its division headquarters here?"

Wyland's eyes flickered. "No," he said flatly.

"I have a hunch that that's behind this offer of yours."

"Now, hold on, Loring."

"Looks as though you let the cat out of the bag," Loring said, grinning. He now could let the news out, without endangering Herb Lane's job. Wyland would assume that he had been astute enough to size up the situation merely from his offer to buy him out. He stood up, ending the discussion. "I don't like the deal," he added. "I'll stick it out."

Wyland's face turned stiff. "Damn it, Loring; I'd be doing you a favor," he said, rising. "My next offer won't touch this one. You may be the town's banker, but I've got the cash money—and money counts. From now on, I'm bucking you everywhere and in every way I can. You understand?"

"Thanks for the warning," Loring said, and went to open the door for his departing visitor.

LORING had always closed the bank for half an hour at twelve o'clock, so that he could go out for his midday meal. Today, he did some visiting in that half-hour. He stopped in at Jim Burke's barber shop and patent medicine store; he visited Langley's blacksmith shop, the lumber yard which Luke Harlan owned, and stopped in at Jeb Watt's carpenter shop.

He went to the Acme Freighting Company, and the Prospect Cafe—which now was not serving meals. He called on the Widow Jarvis, who sewed and sold millinery and other feminine things. Last of all, he visited Les Harper's general store. He'd skipped only Harry Jennett's place, knowing Jennett wouldn't welcome him.

Les Harper took the news calmly, and shared his scanty meal with the banker. "It's all right, John," he said, "if true. And if Wyland's gambling on it, it must be true. But how are we going to hold out? We'll be starved out before the snows let up. I've been honest; I've shared my stock of grub with my customers until I haven't enough to eat. Only Wyland and maybe Harry Jennett have enough food on hand to see them through." He shook his head despairingly. "Wyland will get what he wants just by waiting. The weather is his trump card."

"An early thaw—"

"It won't come. And you know it."

"Spring's not so far off, Les."

"We could have this kind of weather all the way into April," the storekeeper said. "I'm telling you, John, this town's in a bad way. I expect some deaths from starvation. And if there should be an epidemic!" He shuddered at the thought.

Loring went back to the bank with his hope again at low ebb. He was fueling his stove with a few sticks of wood and bunches of hay when the bank door rattled open. He looked around and saw that it was Black Jack Mundy who had entered. The outlaw said, "Don't reach for that shotgun of yours, friend." He was joking, but his smile today wasn't much. Jack Mundy looked a little sick, and Loring knew it was from the liquor he had poured into himself last night.

Jack came and hugged the stove. He said, "I'm hungry as a wolf, Loring. You were right. There's no grub in this town except what Stace Wyland's got cached away. I tried to buy a little from him, and he laughed at me. I had a notion to gut-shoot him. Might have too, only that girl, Bonnie, came between us."

"Jack, this town's been hungry ever since before Christmas."

"Women and kids too, eh?"

"Sure, Jack."

"Trains can't get through?"

"The tracks are blocked for eighty miles."

"No chance of freighting stuff in by wagon?"

"You know that," Loring said. "It'd be foolhardy for men to risk crossing the plains. Caught in a blizzard, they'd lose their way—freeze to death. You'd better head back to your hideout."

Jack said, "I've got a lot of grub out there. More than you figure. Why, I could feed this whole town. Tell you how I got it. Sam Ruman, the contractor who was building the railroad, would draw on the railroad company for supplies to feed his men and grain for his horses, carloads of it. Ruman got it on credit, but never paid for it. He drew twice as much stuff as he needed, sold half of it to certain hombres who freighted it maybe a hundred miles away. Ruman pocketed the cash."

Loring had heard how the railroad company the first year had overcharged Sam Ruman for supplies, so that the contractor lost money on the season's work. And how the second year, Ruman had finished up by going into bankruptcy so that he would not have to pay the company for the vast amount of supplies he had drawn. It was a dog eat dog sort of business.

Jack Mundy went on, "I had some money this fall. I bought eight tons of grub from Ruman, figuring I'd haul it down to Nebraska and sell it for a big profit. But the winter came too blamed quick for me. Loring, I've got beans, flour, bacon at my hideout. Tons of it. I've even got barrels of crackers and cases of dried apples."

He paused again, gave the banker another sly look. "That give you an idea, friend?"

"The right idea," John Loring said. "How far is it to your hideout?"

CHAPTER V

The Banker Skins Mules

BLACK JACK MUNDY said, "Maybe seventeen miles."

"That means thirty-four miles, out and back," Loring added.

It wasn't much of a trip, even for a lumbering freight wagon in decent weather. But with the prairies deep in snow and one blizzard following another, thirty-four miles could be disastrous. One clear day in January, a townsman had driven a mile and a half to a farm for a load of hay for his stove. A blizzard had caught him on the way back, and the man and his team had been found a week later frozen to death. John Loring had heard of settlers dying between barn and house when a blizzard struck.

"It cost me eight hundred dollars, Loring."

"I'll give you a thousand for it, when it's delivered here."

"Who'll haul it in?"

"I'll see Russ Yeager, at Acme Freighting," Loring said, and got into his hat and heavy coat.

Russ Yeager wasn't at his wagonyard office. Loring and Jack Mundy found him in Stace Wyland's saloon, along with a dozen other townsmen who found time heavy on their hands. Loring put the proposition to the freighter. Russ Yeager was an old man, lazy by nature, and now very cautious. He would not make the trip. Too big a risk.

"It's a crazy idea," he grumbled. "I wouldn't send a dog out of town at a time like this, let alone go myself."

"It's a chance to save this town, Russ."

"A blamed slim chance!" Yeager said. "Tell you what I'll do, though. I'll furnish a wagon and four mules if you can find a driver."

Loring looked at Jack Mundy. "What do you say, Jack?"

"Why should I risk my hide," Jack said, "to fill other hombres' bellies? I'm not the one that's hungry." He shook his head. "When I leave here, I'm forking my Old Buck horse. He can run if a blizzard comes up. Nope; if a man that's hungry won't take a chance with a mule team, Black Jack Mundy ain't that loco, either!"

Loring looked about, and saw how the listening men avoided his gaze. They might be hungry and fear starvation, but they were terrified of the white hell that swept the open prairies. Harry Jennett, the dour storekeeper, muttered, "A lot of a nerve you've got, Loring—going into the store business. What are you trying to do, ruin Les Harper and me?"

"If I get that grub here," Loring retorted, "I'll sell it for what it costs me."

Stace Wyland said mockingly, "Well, you're not getting it here, banker. No

man is going to throw his life away on a risky gamble like that." He puffed on his cigar, smug in his belief that Loring would have to back down. "Or maybe you'll haul it in, yourself?"

Bonnie Hanlon was there, taking it all in. She looked at Wyland and then at John Loring, her worldly wise eyes seeming to weigh them.

She said, "Stace, you're the best fed man in town, and so you're in the best condition. You'd have the best chance of getting through."

"A woman can think of the damnedest notions," Wyland said, chuckling.

"You haven't the nerve it takes, Stace."

"It's not a question of nerve," Wyland said angrily. "What's the idea, trying to bait me into it?"

"You claim to be a gambler."

"A sure-thing gambler," Loring broke in. "That's Stace Wyland, a sure-thing gambler. Let up on him, Bonnie. It's nothing to him. Wyland would rather see the town stay hungry. But that grub is coming here." He turned back to old Russ Yeager. "Hitch up your mules," he said. "I'll drive them."

John Loring drove them. They were four big mules, but the lack of grain had left them gaunt. Russ Yeager had his wagon on runners for the winter. Word had spread, and most of the town watched the banker-turned-teamster take his rig out of New Prospect. Only one person called out to him, however. Bonnie cried, "Luck, banker!" And Loring lifted his whip to her.

BLACK JACK MUNDY followed on his Old Buck horse, a big buckskin gelding with a blotched brand. The outlaw rode behind the rig, to make it easier for his mount, and called out directions. "Head for the end of the railroad," he instructed.

Loring followed the new roadbed to the end of the construction work a short mile from town. Jack then told Loring to turn south to Baker's. Loring knew the Baker homestead. It was three miles to the south.

The afternoon remained clear, and sun was pleasant even though it gave no warmth. The mules plodded on and on, and the empty wagon rode easily over the deep snow. The Baker farm, a rough board shack and barn, was passed. The unmarked trail now swung southwest to Duck Slough, on Willow Creek.

The sun went down, but the night sky was star studded. It was cold, and John Loring felt numb, but there was no wind. The banker began to believe that he was in luck, and that the still weather would hold. It was midnight when they reached Duck Slough, now an ice and snow covered pond fringed by brush and a few scrub trees. There was a homestead cabin by the slough, and Loring halted his team. When Jack rode up alongside, Loring said, "We'll rest a few minutes."

Jack said, "No smoke coming from the chimney."

He rode over to the shanty and, without dismounting, shoved the door open. He peered into the dark shanty, then fumbled in his pocket for a match. After the match flared and went out, he returned to Loring and said, "We'll go on."

"Somebody dead?"

"Froze stiff as a log."

By dawn the mules were played out from plodding through the dry loose snow and bucking the drifts. But before the sun showed, Jack said, "This is it." They had come to Willow Creek.

The outlaw's sod hut stood among some trees. There was a pole-and-brush lean-to behind it, a big affair now walled in by drifted snow. In it the grub was stored. Black Jack hadn't exaggerated; there was flour in sacks and barrels, beans in hundred-pound bags, cases of slab bacon, cases of dry apples, two barrels of crackers. And, at the moment even more important, half a dozen sacks of grain mixture for the mules and Jack's horse.

Loring was cold to the core, and dead tired, but the sight of the treasure made him brighten. "We'll load the sledge, so there'll be room in here for the animals. We'll rest them until tomorrow morning, then start back."

Jack grumblingly agreed to that. He was in no mood for such hard work; Loring knew that the outlaw never liked honest toil, but they struggled and strained with bags and barrels. They loaded the sledge to capacity, and still there was a great store of supplies left in the lean-to. They unhitched the mules, took them into the lean-to. Loring found feedbags in the wagonbed, and filled them with grain.

Jack cared for his buckskin horse.

They had shovels in the sledge, and used them to dig open the sod-hut's drifted door. There was a stone fireplace instead of a stove in the soddie, and Jack started a fire. He had plenty of wood chopped, and soon the two men were warm enough to remove their coats. Jack did the cooking, beans and bacon, coffee and fry-pan biscuits. No meal had ever tasted so good to Banker John Loring.

They slept, woke up and ate again. They kept the fire roaring. They watered and grained the animals. That night, by lantern-light, the two men gambled at two-handed poker. Loring lost thirteen dollars before midnight. Black Jack brought out a bottle of whiskey, and they nearly emptied it. In every way they were as unalike as men could be, yet John Loring had never felt so kindly disposed toward any man as he did toward this stocky, yellow-haired outlaw.

He said finally, "Jack, why don't you quit your wild ways?"

The younger man grinned. "Could you stop being a banker, John?"

It wasn't an answer, yet it was answer enough. Black Jack Mundy liked the sort of life he led. He would follow his twisted trail until a lawman's bullet stopped him. Loring had a notion that the young fellow would never hang.

He said, "Let's turn in. We'll get an early start in the morning."

In the morning, the sky was ominously bleak.

CHAPTER VI

The End of Hunger

WHEN the sun shone at all that day, it was no brighter than a gold piece reflecting lamplight. The dirty-cotton clouds obscured it. There still was little wind, and that was good—so long as it lasted. Rested and grain-fed, knowing they were home-bound, the mules were almost eager. John Loring made Duck Slough by two in the afternoon. Despite the corpse in the homestead shanty, Loring and his companion halted by the Slough for an hour.

They watered and grained the animals, built a fire and cooked up a meal. They were in good spirits, even jovial except when they studied the threatening clouds. With the team rested, they headed northeast toward the Baker farm. Black Jack was riding beside Loring, now, and had his horse tied to the tailgate.

"You figure we'll make Baker's before dark?" the outlaw asked.

Loring said he was counting on it, but the pace of the mules was slower than it had been that morning. By five o'clock, on Loring's watch, it was dark. But they saw a light ahead, and kept going toward it. Half an hour later, they pulled up to Clet Baker's place.

The farmer welcomed them and the whole family, Mrs. Baker and five children, were almost overcome with excitement when the two visitors gave them a side of bacon, a sack of flour, and some dried apples. The homesteaders had been existing on a diet of sod potatoes for months. Loring and Jack shared the meal Mrs. Baker prepared, after putting up their animals in the rickety plank barn. It was something of a party; the family was as starved for companionship as for food, and it wasn't until midnight that Loring said, "Jack, those mules should be rested enough."

Black Jack protested. He wanted to stay over until morning, for he had a full belly and was drowsy from sitting by the Baker stove. But Loring was insistent. He did not know why, but he felt a pressing urge to move on. It was almost a hunch. He was sure that now was the time to start on the last five miles of the laborious trip—and he was both right and wrong.

Had they stayed over, the blizzard would have kept them trapped until it blew itself out. As it was, the swirling snowstorm caught the two men on the open prairies.

There was one terrific gust of wind, at first, then a steady pressure of the gale. The snow came whipping at team and sledge, at the two men huddled on the seat. Icy particles stung their faces like myriad needles jabbing. Loring's hands grew so cold, despite his gloves, that he had no feel of the ribbons. The mules kept trudging along, and Loring swung them more to east. Black Jack yelled thinly,

"Keep north, dammit! You want to get lost?"

Loring didn't answer. He kept going east for what he judged was a mile, then he put the mules straight north. He had a reason for the maneuver. He didn't want to miss the end of the telegraph poles that marked the railroad. By swinging more to the east, he figured his chances of finding the line of poles—now his only landmark—would be better. For he would be feeling his way, now. He was all but blind. At times, he could not see the rumps of the mules!

There was nothing but the swirling murky whiteness, the howl of the wind, and the numbing cold. Tears ran from his eyes, and the icy snow struck agony in his eyeballs. Loring groaned and Black Jack Mundy cursed. They went on like that, through a maelstrom of chaos, trusting to blind luck—hoping that the mules were still headed in the right direction.

There was no telling by the gale. It had struck out of the north, but now the wind seemed to blow from every direction, sometimes even with a terrific downward pressure. The minutes seemed hours, an hour, an eternity. The mules began to falter, and the blacksnake whip serve no purpose. Loring gave the reins to Black Jack, then dropped down from the sledge. The gale punched at him, but he made it to the nearest animal. Loring's gloved hands found the trouble. The mules couldn't breathe; condensation had formed choking ice at their nostrils. The icicles had to be broken away from each of the four mules, then Loring went to perform the operation on Black Jack's horse.

They went on again, battling fury with diminishing strength. And finally Jack Mundy wailed, "I'm leaving you—you and this damn' wagon!"

But he didn't go. For once there was fear in the outlaw. He stayed there on the sledge, shivering violently, cursing in a panicky voice. Fear was in the banker, too. He felt the cold eating deeper and deeper into him. There was a knot of pain in his stomach, a cramp that made him want to double over and let the cold have its way with him. Worse still was the feeling of blindness, of not knowing if he was guiding the team north to the railroad and the little town that huddled by it. Loring tried to gauge the distance, and was only more bewildered. He knew that, in this swirling density, there was real danger of passing the telegraph poles without seeing them. That preyed on his mind. If he drove past the snow-clogged roadbed onto the plains beyond, Jack and he would be done for.

AT LAST he reined in, and shouted above the din, "Get on your horse, partner, tie the end of your lass-rope to your saddle-horn, and give me the loop to put around my arm."

Black Jack Mundy gave him an uncomprehending look out of aching eyes.

"We'll stretch the rope taut," Loring told him. "You flank the sledge and try to catch a telegraph pole."

The younger man understood, then, and climbed stiffly down from the seat. He felt his way back, and returned leading his Old Buck horse. Each man took an end of the rope, and Jack mounted his ice-matted horse. They went on that way, lost to each other's sight yet bound together. They went on and on, and the rope came up against nothing on the barren snow flats.

Loring told himself that they had missed the poles, that they were already beyond their mark. Then suddenly he was jerked violently. The rope had tugged hard at his arm. Loring pulled up, and shouted wildly for his companion. Jack came in on the rope. He leaned from the saddle and yelled, "We caught a pole, all right, but only because of the riata!"

It was easier after that, knowing the direction. They turned east, to the right, and followed the telegraph poles, one after the other. And finally there was a light ahead, dimly seen, but still a light, the lighted window of the railroad station at New Prospect town. Black Jack Mundy pulled out his gun and fired three quick shots into the gale. He began to laugh and yell in crazy fashion.

That was a Saturday night. Sunday, John Loring slept late and, after rising, he did nothing more than cook a meal and tend his fire. He was grateful for a day of rest. His muscles ached. His hands and feet were frost-bitten, and tormented him. His face had been whipped raw by wind and snow. The cold had caused his lips to crack. And he couldn't get warm.

But he was easy in his mind. He had

turned his wagon load of supplies over to Les Harper for a fair distribution, and he knew that the townspeople would be fighting their way through the storm for their share of the precious food. Loring felt that he had done his part in keeping New Prospect going. The future would do the rest. John Loring was sure that the fortunes of the town would take a turn for the better.

He was counting on the railroad having its division headquarters at New Prospect, on more people and businesses coming in, and on the coming spring and summer being kind to the ranchers. It was a shoddy but good town, it was a hard but fertile land. Everyone suffering the winter through would realize that when spring came. And there was more food at Black Jack Mundy's hideout, if more were needed.

John Loring lighted a cigar. He was indeed content.

It was after he had cooked and eaten his evening meal that the urgent knock sounded on his door. He called out, "Come in," thinking it would be Jack Mundy come for his thousand dollars.

But it was Bonnie Hanlon who quickly opened and then closed the door behind her. She stood leaning against the door, breathing hard, her cheeks red from the cold. Loring was speechless. He could only stare.

CHAPTER VII

Loring Calls His Shots

THERE are women who remain attractive only so long as they are in the bloom of youth. But Bonnie Hanlon was not one of them. Her beauty was a lasting thing that had its own youth. John Loring thought of that now, surprised though he was to have her there in what he called his home. He went to her, took her arm, led her close to his stove. He still did not know what to say.

Bonnie had no mocking smile for him tonight. There was worry in her eyes, or perhaps fear. After a moment, she said, "The storm almost did for me, just crossing the street. I don't see how you managed to tr[illegible]r through it last night."

"Jack and [illegible]k," Loring heard himself say.

"Yes. Yes, you had luck. But now—"

"Something's wrong, Bonnie?"

"Stace Wyland didn't want you to get back with that food," the girl said. "He was counting on you dying out on the plains, in the snow. He wants your bank, John, so he can control this town. And he won't be satisfied until he's got it."

"There's nothing he can do, now," Loring said. "I'll keep the bank open, somehow. I'll keep the business people and farmers going."

"He won't have it that way," Bonnie told him. "That's why I came." She drew a sharp breath. She seemed to strengthen her resolve. "After what you did, it's only right for you to be warned. They'll get you tonight if you go to the saloon. If not tonight, then some other time."

"How, Bonnie?"

"You remember the men who stole Jeb Watts's cow?" she asked. Then, not waiting for a reply: "Dutch Schultz and Ike Payson came in to town before the blizzard struck. They've been at Wyland's saloon ever since. Wyland's been talking to them, building up their hatred for you and Jack Mundy. I heard some of what was said. Stace Wyland means to use them to get rid of you."

"What's his plan, Bonnie?"

"I don't know all of it. I had to be careful, so they wouldn't suspect I was listening. But I know Wyland means to get Jack drunk, and keep him drunk. When you show up at the saloon, Schultz and Payson will pick a fight with Jack Mundy."

Loring nodded, said, "I think I see it." It was a dirty game that had been played many times. A fight started between gunmen, and an unarmed bystander killed, supposedly by mistake.

Loring crossed the room and opened a trunk that stood by the wall. It contained a few clothes, some books and other odds and ends, and a gun that he took in his hand. It was a five-shot .38 caliber weapon, much lighter than the guns packed by most men. But years ago, on the expert advice of an old gunsmith, Loring had learned that a lighter weapon was more easily handled and aimed than

a long-barreled .44 caliber. And his weapon could b deadly.

He checked the loa the gun, then slipped it into the pocket of his overcoat. He pulled on the coat, put on his hat. He found Bonnie watching him in that worried way that was so new to her. He wondered, Can she be afraid for me?

He said, "I don't understand why you warned me. I always had an idea that you didn't think much of me."

"Maybe I'm a little like Stace Wyland," Bonnie told him. "And envied you your respectability and the position you hold in this town. After all. I'm only a faro dealer. And I know what your opinion of me must be."

"You don't know at all, Bonnie."

"Now what do you mean by that, Mister Loring?"

"When I look at you, I see a woman—not a faro dealer."

"It's nice of you to say that."

"I mean it, Bonnie. Will you stay here until this is over?"

"Yes, John. If you want me to."

Loring said, "I want you to," and went out into the storm.

HE FOUGHT his way across to Wyland's hotel-saloon. He entered and shoved the door closed, then saw, as his eyes became accustomed to the lamplight, that it must be as Bonnie had said. Stace Wyland was behind the bar. Black Jack Mundy, looking drunk, was on the front side of it. Ike Payson and the bearded Dutch Schultz, who seemed recovered from his wound, sat at a table with bottle and glasses. Half a dozen townsmen were huddled about the stove.

Loring went to the near end of the bar, laid out a quarter. "Brandy, Stace," he said. Jack Mundy looked at him in the dull-witted way of a drunk. The outlaw said, "How about my thousand dollars, banker?"

"Tomorrow, Jack. Come to the bank."

"I'll be there, sure."

Ike Payson left his table, came toward the bar. Dutch Schultz remained seated, his right hand inside his coat. Loring saw all that as he drained his glass. He knew how it would be worked. Payson would pick a fight with Jack Mundy. The outlaw would go for his gun. Schultz would side Payson. And a shot would come Loring's way. Ike Payson could collect the bounty offered by the railroad for Black Jack Mundy, the banker thought grimly. And Schultz will collect from Wyland for my hide—maybe. He thrust his right hand into his coat pocket, closed it about his gun.

Payson stopped at the bar close to Jack Mundy. A swarthy, mean-looking hardcase. He growled, "Give me another bottle, Wyland."

Wyland set a bottle before him. Payson reached. His arm jerked, and the bottle toppled over and dropped behind the bar. Payson whirled and bellowed, "What's the idea, shoving me?"

He cursed the outlaw, and Loring saw both men going for their guns. The banker yelled, "Payson, I'll back-shoot you!" As he spoke, he was throwing down on Dutch Schultz with his .38, and none too soon.

Schultz fired without rising from his chair. Four guns were blasting. The bar-

(Concluded on page 106)

Backache, Leg Pains May Be Danger Sign
Of Tired Kidneys

If backache and leg pains are making you miserable, don't just complain and do nothing about them. Nature may be warning you that your kidneys need attention.

The kidneys are Nature's chief way of taking excess acids and poisonous waste out of the blood. They help most people pass about 3 pints a day.

If the 15 miles of kidney tubes and filters don't work well, poisonous waste matter stays in the blood. These poisons may start nagging backaches, rheumatic pains, leg pains, loss of pep and energy, getting up nights, swelling, puffiness under the eyes, headaches and dizziness. Frequent or scanty passages with smarting and burning sometimes shows there is something wrong with your kidneys or bladder.

Don't wait! Ask your druggist for Doan's Pills, a stimulant diuretic, used successfully by millions for over 50 years. Doan's give happy relief and will help the 15 miles of kidney tubes flush out poisonous waste from the blood. Get Doan's Pills. *(Adv.)*

There was a rapid exchange of shots

BROTHER'S KEEPER

By ALLAN K. ECHOLS

Law is one thing and justice another, but Sheriff Babson knows how to put them both together and make them work!

BACK of the saloon it was dark and muddy as Joe Carder squatted on one heel and struck a match. The small yellow flame flickered, and the sightless eyes in the hard, florid face of Bob Haskell stared back at him, unseeing, glazed. Even in death, the big rancher seemed to be accusing Joe, as he had done in the Staghorn Saloon not a hundred feet from here not more than two hours ago.

Joe moved the match forward and backward over the body lying in the mud, holding it a moment over the knife stuck in the rancher's back. He gripped its handle and extracted it from the wound, for he had spent the better part of several evenings dressing the blade

down from a worn-out file, sharpening its edge and whittling out a hickory handle for it. He thought a lot of that knife.

He wiped the blade on the leg of his levis and slipped it into his hip pocket. He straightened up, and his movements were tense, furtive. He was in the darkness near the back hitch-rail at the rear of the saloon, and there would be men coming out to get their horses and ride home. Whenever the door opened it would pour a small square of light out onto the dark ground where the body of his enemy lay.

Joe went around back of the shed and hid the knife carefully in a clump of poke weeds where he could find it later. It wouldn't do for the knife to be found. Too many people would recognize it.

He went swiftly through the blackness and untied his own horse. As he rode out of town, he held back with strong effort against his urge to put spurs to him and run. He felt fear riding behind him, and he fought against turning his head back to see if he were being pursued.

He was near to panic, and he fought it off as he kept his horse's head up and his stride down to a natural canter while they were getting past the row of houses that ended at the boundary of the town of Staghorn.

By the time he was free of the town, where the wildly galloping beats of his horse's hoofs would not be heard, he was sweating. He kept on telling himself that this didn't mean anything to him—but he could not make himself believe it. He knew better.

Once free of the town, he pushed the horse into a run and unwound the trail before him to where it forded Pecan Creek. Here the animal slowed down to cross the slippery footing of the rocks, and Joe pulled him up short.

He spoke to himself sharply. "You fool, you can't get away. You won't do yourself any good running."

It came to him clearly that running wouldn't get him out of trouble, because a man can't run and be free at the same time. He carries the trouble along with him when he runs, and so he doesn't get away from it. He pondered this while the horse drank, then reached his decision.

Joe Carder turned his horse around and rode back into town and to the County Jail. And he was hurrying back toward the Sheriff's office with all the urgency which had driven him to run away.

SHERIFF BABSON was just taking his slicker off a nail on the littered office wall preparatory to blowing out the light and going home. He was a ponderous man with a white flowing mustache and blank blue eyes which never told anybody what was going on in his mind. He was no shining star as a peace officer, but in his slow, obstinate way he kept things pretty quiet in what had once been a rip-roaring Caddo County.

He turned slowly when Joe Carder came in and his eyes fastened on the young fellow while he waited for Joe to speak. He had been neither friendly nor unfriendly to Joe since Joe's last trouble.

Joe said, "Mr. Babson, I thought I ought to tell you. When I went out to get my horse back of the Staghorn, I tripped over the body of a dead man."

Babson asked, "Who?"

"Bob Haskell."

Babson's nose twitched and his eyes bored deeper into Joe.

"What happened?"

"I don't know. I just stumbled over him. I lit a match to see who it was, and it was him. I just thought I'd better tell you."

"Yes," Babson answered. "Thanks." He rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "I reckon we'd better go take a look."

"You mean you want me to go with you?"

"I reckon you'd better. You found him."

Joe left his horse at the rail and walked down the dark street with Babson, who had brought a lantern along. Back of the Staghorn the body of the big rancher lay just as Joe had found it, and Babson got down on his knees in the damp ground and examined it, turning it over to reveal the stab wound in the back.

"Doc Greer can't do him any good now," Babson observed, "but go get him, anyway."

When Joe returned with the little

white-bearded doctor there still was nobody present from the saloon. The spring shower had hit at just about sundown, and there were only three riding horses left at the back rail. Rain had kept things quiet.

Greer got down on his knees, used his stethoscope, felt the pulse and examined the wound in the rancher's back. "He must have been dead an hour or so, I'd say. And the knife must have reached his heart. Long knife, it must have been." He got to his feet, rubbed the mud off his knees. "Well, there's nothing we can do to help him."

"Then you get somebody and get him away. And don't let 'em track up the ground around here. We'll go on in and see what we can learn." He picked up his lantern and looked at Joe.

Joe knew that there was no use to protest having to go with Babson. Out of hearing of the doctor, he stopped and said, "I might as well tell you now. Haskell and me had words earlier."

Babson thought this over. "Yes, you might as well have told me at first. I'd probably be finding it out, anyway. What was it about?"

"Same thing. Haskell's trying to spread out. He's been wanting our land along the creek so's he can dam it up for water. He hasn't got enough."

"I'd a-thought he'd try to buy it off you instead of fighting about it."

"He did, but me and my brother don't want to sell. Haskell said we was just trying to hold him up because he had money. Called us a pair of gray-neck squatters, and said if he ever missed any more of his stock he'd see we hung for it if he had to handle the rope himself. As much as accusing us of being thieves."

"So what'd you do about it?"

"George and me was having a few drinks, and George got hot under the collar and told him he probably got his start with a long loop, and that he'd better let us alone or we'd make him think he'd stepped on a rattler. So Haskell mentioned that I was a back shooter that ought to be hung already, and I hit him and knocked him down. He wasn't wearing a gun, and I was, so he threatened to kill me the next time he saw me, if I didn't shoot him in the back first. Then he went out, and I don't know what he did until I found him dead."

"What did you and your brother do after that?"

"George left a few minutes after that to go out and see his girl. Him and Kitty is going to get married in a couple of weeks. I played a little poker, then quit and started for my horse, heading for home. That's when I found him."

"That all?"

"It's enough, to my way of thinking."

Babson didn't say anything, but walked on into the saloon, and Joe followed him. There weren't more than half a dozen men in the place, four at the poker table and the other two standing at the bar talking to Oakes, who ran the place and tended his own bar.

"You sit down and wait for me," Babson said. He lifted the globe of his lantern and blew out the flame. Then while Joe sat in the corner, Babson circulated among the men and talked to them all, asking questions, not commenting on the answers.

Joe sat in the corner, and the numbness in him began to subside; his mind began to stir about and take stock of the situation. He went over and got a beer from Oakes. Oakes poured it and looked at him with a quick, strange look.

He went back and sat down. Babson was talking to the men at the far end of the bar, with his back to him. Joe looked at the door and wondered whether he could simply walk out of the place and go about his own business. But he knew that as things were, he could not. That unlocked, swinging door might just as well be a set of prison bars.

On the other hand, it was probable that he could make a simple statement which would open the door to him. But he dismissed the idea as quickly as it came, and he was ashamed that the idea had come to him.

After he had finished his beer, Babson came back over to his table and sat down. He was as ponderous and as slow moving as usual, and as Joe studied him he could not make out what was in Babson's mind.

The sheriff said, "The boys say the poker game broke up at nine-fifteen. They remembered the time because Hornaday had to quit and ride over to

Terrill to catch the accommodation train, and Hornaday had all the money. That right?"

Joe nodded. He was puzzled because he knew that Babson was getting at something, and he could not figure out what it was.

Babson's next statement was just as slow and as uncharged with tension as his previous one. "But you came into my office at straight up ten o'clock. I was just closing up to go home. Remember the time?"

"I didn't notice it," Joe said. And then before Babson spoke again, he knew what he had done wrong.

"That leaves forty-five minutes that you didn't account for," Babson said. "If you'd reported to me the minute you found Haskell, I might not have thought much about it. But like it is, the way I figure it, you had plenty of time to find Haskell and kill him, and do whatever you had to do, and then come and report the killing to me, claiming you found Haskell dead. It looks like you slipped up, Joe."

Joe felt the sweat breaking out on his forehead. "I forgot to tell you at first. But when I bumped into Haskell, the first thing I thought about was that I'd be blamed. I reckon I got spooked. Anyway, I got my horse and headed for home, then kind of got hold of myself and came back."

The sheriff scratched his chin. "That all?"

"That's all."

"I'm afraid it ain't enough, Joe." He got to his feet slowly. "Unbuckle your gun belt and lay it on the table, and we'll get going."

JOE CARDER was dreaming that he was in jail waiting for the hangman, and when he finally awoke to the sound of the clanging steel door, he knew that it wasn't altogether a nightmare. Sheriff Babson came in and sat down on the cot beside him.

Babson reached into his inside coat pocket and brought out Joe's homemade knife.

"Yours?" he asked, twirling it in his fingers.

"Yes." There wasn't any use in lying; everybody that he'd ever gone fishing with had seen it and had talked about what a good hand-made job it was, what a sharp edge it would hold.

"Where'd you leave it?"

Joe felt a tightening in the pit of his stomach. He looked at the floor.

"I lost it. I don't know what happened to it."

Babson picked up one of the boots Joe had not yet put on, and examined the instep, where black corral mud had hardened on it. He examined the mud, picked up the other boot and saw the same mud.

"Maybe you just forgot," he said gently. "I found the knife in a bunch of poke weeds back of the stable, and there was boot tracks in the mud leading from where Haskell was killed to the weeds, and back again. Joe, what happened?"

Joe felt the noose tightening around his neck. "I tell you, I didn't kill Haskell, and I don't know a thing about it. If you found my knife you found my knife, and that's that. But still I didn't kill Haskell. If you don't believe me, then go away and let me alone."

Babson sighed.

"Joe, I reckon I miss a lot of things. I'm missing something now, maybe. But I can't figure it. You fought with Haskell, he gets killed out in the dark, and you was there. And it was you hid that knife, all right. If you didn't kill him with your own knife, then I can't help the feeling that you know who did. Like I say, there's something I don't see, and you could show it to me, if you would."

"You want me to show you how to hang me," Joe said bitterly. "I reckon you'd better just build up your own case against me. Under the circumstances, I'd say I done cooperated with you as far as I could be expected to do."

"I didn't say I wanted you to help hang yourself. As a matter of fact, I don't like the evidence I got against you. It's almost too good. Somehow, I can't figure you as being so dumb as to leave so much evidence against yourself."

"Then if you don't believe I killed Haskell, turn me loose. You've either got a case against me or you haven't. Can't you make up your mind?"

"Tell the truth, I can't. But you could straighten it out, and I'm going to hold you till you do. After all, I've got enough

proof that it was your knife and that you hid it. That, and your fight with Haskell, could hang you."

"In short," Joe added bitterly, "you're either going to make me talk or hang me for not talking. That it?"

Babson shrugged. "I just want to get at the truth."

"What makes you think I'm not telling you the truth? Or if I was to admit killing Haskell, what proof would you have that I did it?"

"As a matter of fact, I don't think any more that you killed him. I think you're covering for somebody."

"You got the evidence against me," Joe said sharply. "Go on and use it to suit yourself. I haven't got any more to say."

"And let the man that killed him go free? No, Joe. That won't do. The law is supposed to punish the guilty party. And you ain't the guilty party."

"Then who is?"

"Your brother George."

"You leave him out of it," Joe flared. "You haven't got a thing against him. He was visiting his girl—"

Babson interrupted. "That's what I was supposed to think. But he wasn't with her until a lot later. Him and Haskell had trouble over the girl even before your squabble last night. Haskell tried to force the girl to marry him, using his money as a weapon, and George didn't like it.

"I figure that George killed him with your knife, maybe in a fight over the girl, and that you come along later and found the knife and realized that George had done it. You was afraid to leave the knife, and afraid to keep it, so you hid it. You boys stick together closer'n most brothers, and knowin' that George is planning to get married, and that you've already been in trouble—that shooting scrape you had with Ben Torger—you're sacrificing yourself to keep George's name clear. Ain't that about it?"

Two thoughts hit Joe at the same moment and left him in confusion. The first one was the uncanny accuracy with which ponderous old Babson had figured out what had happened, and the second one was concerned with Ben Torger. Suddenly Joe realized that he did not know exactly what had happened back there behind the saloon last night, and that he had to know.

"Look here, Sheriff," he said, "were you telling me the truth when you said the law wanted the guilty party instead of just somebody to hang for this murder?"

"That's what the law is for."

"And have you ever caught me in a lie?"

"No."

"Then here's a proposition. Let me out of here on my word for twenty-four hours. You said you couldn't make a case against George, and you're not satisfied with your case against me. In twenty-four hours I'll come back here with the man that killed Haskell, even if it's George, or I'll tell you everything I know about the case, and you can use it any way you like, even against me."

Babson scratched his chin thoughtfully. Then he got slowly to his feet.

"Come on to the office and get your gun. Your horse is in the livery stable."

IT WAS about noon when Joe reached home and found George watering his horse at the spring back of the house. He stopped a moment before dismounting to look at the towering hills back of the place, with Blue Creek at their foot. The hickories and elms and pines on the hills were fresh green, and the rich bluestem and buffalo grass made a broad rolling carpet right down from the hills to the house under the sycamore tree.

Joe drank this all in, and thinking of the dark stillness of the jail cell in which he had spent the night, he felt a hurting inside him. He saw now how much this place meant to him, and saw, too, the importance of doing what was necessary in order to stay here and enjoy it.

It came to him like a blow between the eyes, the tragedy that would befall George and Kitty if Babson built a murder case against George and made it stick, right on the eve of their wedding.

The brothers had been mighty close since the death of their father, and it brought as much fear to Joe when he thought of what was in store for George as it would have brought to George himself. That was why he had lied about the knife, or why he had hidden the knife and not mentioned it, which to his

way of thinking was the same as a direct lie.

He dismounted at the trough and removed his horse's bridle so he could drink alongside of George's horse. George was rubbing down his sweaty animal with a corncob, and there was something nervous, evasive about him.

Joe didn't know anything about putting things diplomatically. He said what he thought in the fewest possible words.

"Haskell's dead, and I've been in jail all night."

George looked at him queerly, as though he couldn't quite understand Joe. "Yeah. I just heard it about an hour ago. I was going to ride in after I changed horses."

Joe felt that there was something on his brother's mind. "Look, George, Haskell was stabbed with my fishing knife. I found it in Haskell's body and took it and hid it, but Babson found it. He says I killed Haskell."

George asked, "Didn't you?" and then looked off toward the hills.

So that was what was sticking in George's craw! Joe swallowed hard.

"No, I didn't kill him. I thought you did."

George's whole attitude suddenly changed from one of suspicion to deep concern. "Me kill him? I thought you did."

"Well, I didn't, and you didn't. But Babson is sure it's one of us. And he's got us hog-tied on account of my knife. I loaned it to you to take fishing Saturday night. When did you see it last?"

George scratched his head. "I forgot all about it. The last I remember of having it was when I got through cutting bait. I left it stuck in that log alongside Willow Hole down on the creek."

An idea which had hit Joe while he was in jail, but which had slipped his mind on account of more pressing things, came back to him. "And Willow Hole is less than a mile from Ben Torger's shack. I wonder—"

George became excited. "I passed Ben Torger rowing down to the hole with his trotlines as I left it Sunday morning," he said. "He could have found that knife. Haskell has caught him stealing stock from him. And Torger was in the saloon and saw our trouble with Haskell."

"Yeah," Joe said, his breath coming heavily. "And when we had that shooting match over that calf of mine I caught him with, he swore he'd get me if it took to his dying day. If he'd found that knife, and knew Haskell had threatened me, all he'd have to do was to lay for Haskell out back of the saloon and stab him with my knife. He just the same as put a noose around my neck."

George slipped the bridle back onto his horse's head. "It was him came riding through the back section where I was fencing this morning and told me about you being in jail. He had to crow a little. Said he knew you'd buck up against the wrong man one day. Well, put your bridle on. What are we waiting for?"

"No," Joe answered. "You're not going with me. This is between me and Torger."

"The devil I ain't! You got yourself tied tighter into it just to cover me, didn't you?"

"But this is different. We haven't got what you'd call positive proof it was Torger. It just adds up that way, is all."

"It's proof enough for me. I'll go in the house and get my gun."

George was off before Joe could finish voicing his protest.

George went on into the house through the back door, and Joe waited outside. He listened to George's footsteps until George emerged.

Joe hit him a surprise blow on the chin which knocked him unconscious to the ground. Then he picked George up by his armpits and dragged him back inside and laid him on the bed.

"Sorry, kid, but we haven't got enough proof to back us up! And you've got a girl waiting for you!"

He turned and got onto his horse and set out in a lope for the creek bottom, where Ben Torger had a shack and a shirt-tail size piece of ground from which he managed the magic of selling about half a dozen calves every year for every breeding cow in his herd.

BEN TORGER saw him coming. As Joe rode out of the clearing in front of Torger's log shack, a rifle cracked from inside the door, and a bullet knocked Joe off his horse. The animal

shied and ran off into the woods while Joe lay stunned out in the open.

Ben Torger emerged from his shack with his rifle under his arm. He stood and watched a moment, and when Joe didn't move, he came toward the man he thought he had killed.

He was within twenty paces of Joe when Joe regained consciousness. The crease in his scalp was dribbling blood down Joe's face, but he heard Torger's footsteps, and saw him through a haze.

Torger came and stood over him, and then cackled a cold laugh. "Escaped prisoner, you are, Joe, and that ought to be worth a few dollars. I told you I'd get you one day, and I mean, I done it."

Joe stirred, then sat up—to look into the muzzle of Torger's gun. Torger had the cold eyes of a dead fish, in a pinched face which was sunken in around his toothless gums.

Joe said dazedly, "Yeah, I reckon you got me, Torger. If framing me with my own knife didn't do it, that shot did. I reckon you're satisfied now."

Standing over a wounded man whom he intended to finish off anyway, Torger felt in a gloating mood.

"It wasn't a bad idea, was it? I knowed I had you the minute I found your knife down on the crick, and then when you and that big lunk, Haskell, got into that row, I seen where I could kill two birds with one stone—I mean, one knife." He cackled at his own callous joke, then went on. "I reckon beside gettin' rid o' you two hombres, I'll collect a little reward for capturing an escaped prisoner. You did escape from Babson, didn't you?"

"That don't matter," Joe said. He groaned and tried to sit up, and the motion brought his hand near his gun. He whipped the weapon out of its holster and brought it up just as Torger saw the movement and cursed.

They both fired at about the same time. Joe, from his reclining position, missed, but Torger's bullet caught him somewhere in the ribs and knocked him flat. He dug deep for energy enough to get back up on his elbow and lift his gun.

"You told me all I wanted to know," he said, and fired again. Torger's weapon again spoke in unison with his.

Both bullets found flesh. Torger fell; Joe was knocked flat on his back again, and this time he did not have the energy to lift himself up.

Torger sat up and lifted his weapon full on Joe, but before he pulled the trigger, a third weapon spoke and Torger's gun flew out of his bloody hand. The shot saved Joe from death.

George and Babson both came out of the woods, and they both had guns covering Torger.

Old Babson was slow-moving and still as emotionless as he ever had been. George was breathing hard through his nose, and his chin was twitching. Babson was keeping a sharp eye on him to keep the raging youth from putting another bullet through Torger.

"Now take it easy, George," the sheriff cautioned Joe's brother. "I know how you feel, but 'twon't do you any good to kill him. We heard what he said to Joe, and that's enough to clear you boys and hang him."

Joe had finally managed to get up into a sitting position, and he was looking dazedly at the newcomers.

"I thought I left you at home," he muttered to George.

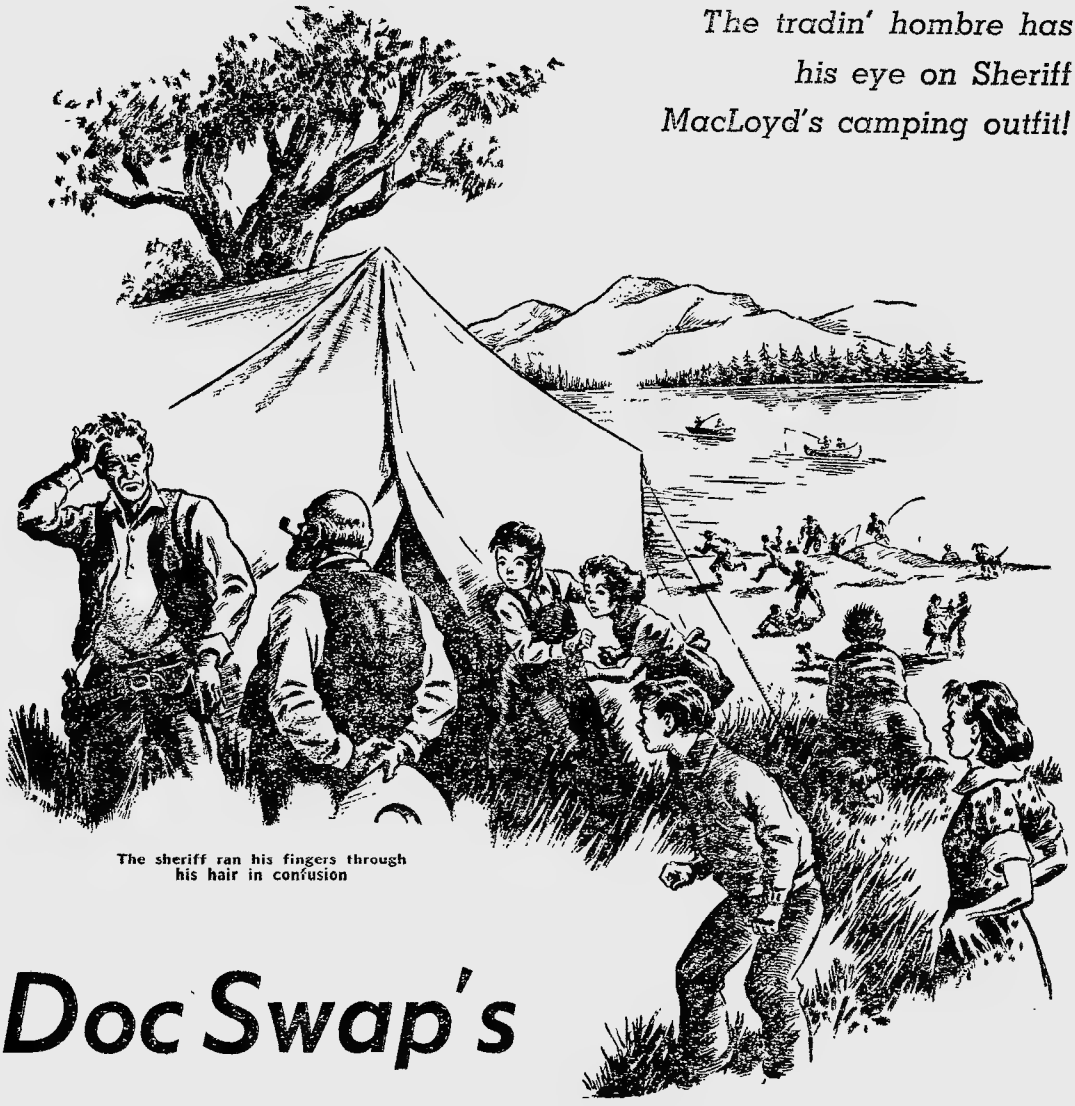
"You did leave him there," old Babson explained. "But I didn't let you out of jail just to go your own way and try to bring me the hombre that killed Haskell. I knew you were hiding something up your sleeve, so I turned you out so's I could follow you and see what it was. I found George just coming to, and he told me what you was up to. You shouldn't have done it that way. You almost got killed, and then who'd have known it wasn't you that killed Haskell?"

"I'd have known it," George said. "Because he told me he didn't do it."

The old sheriff shook his head. "You boys will never learn," he opined. "You think that just because your own word is as good as gold, everybody else will believe what you say. It's a mighty fine trait, but a kind of expensive luxury sometimes. George, help me take Joe in and patch him up, and don't try to repay him that crack in the jaw."

George grinned. "All right. I'll save that debt till after I'm married. I don't want my best man to come to the wedding with a black eye."

The tradin' hombre has his eye on Sheriff MacLoyd's camping outfit!



The sheriff ran his fingers through his hair in confusion

Doc Swap's Vacation Venture

By BEN FRANK

WADDLING down Dry Bluff's one street, old Doc Swap whistled merrily through his ragged white whiskers. Except for a mild thirst which called for a bottle of his favorite beverage, strawberry pop, the old swapper didn't have a worry in the world. But the clang of a hammer against iron coming from behind the Bluff County jail stopped him flat-footed.

The clang came again and again, and Doc's curiosity grew and grew. He reckoned that Sheriff MacLoyd, his rival in the two occupations dearest to his heart—fiddle playing and swapping—must be up to something.

Whipping off his fancy pearl-gray Stetson—he'd swapped a wind-broken old horse for the hat and considered this one of the highlights of his swapping career—Doc scratched his shiny bald head and debated whether to satisfy his thirst or his curiosity. As usual, he decided to satisfy his curiosity.

With a little snort and a muttered, "Wonder what the dad-blasted ole horse-thief's up to?" he headed around the corner of the sun-warped jail.

What Doc saw made his keen, blue eyes bug and his fat jaws go slack.

SHERIFF MacLOYD swung a heavy hammer with his bony right hand, driving an iron stake into the dry, hard ground. It was the last of a dozen tent stakes, and the tent itself lay spread on the ground. Fancy camping gear was strewn about. A wood-burning camp stove, a varmint-proof grub box, a thick mattress, a cot, a box of shiny tin dishes, pots and pans. And half a wagon load, so it seemed, of fancy fishing tackle.

"Bless my soul!" Doc exclaimed.

MacLoyd's hammer missed the iron stake, slipped from his fingers and crashed into the box of tin dishes. MacLoyd cussed.

He pawed out a plug of tobacco, bit off a cow-choking chew and glared at Doc.

"A feller can't do nothin' without yuh stickin' yore big fat nose right in the middle of it!" he raved. "Bent half my plates. Busted a hole in—"

"Startin' up a circus?" Doc asked blandly.

MacLoyd spat angrily and expertly, showering an unsuspecting horsefly winging its way through the air.

"Ain't startin' nothin' except gettin' ready to take two weeks' vacation," he said coldly. "Just experimentin' with my new tent right at the present."

Doc had stepped over to the tent. It was made of heavy green canvas. He ran his pudgy fingers along a seam. It was a mighty fine tent. Strong. Even had mosquito netting over the windows and the doorway. A heavy canvas floor, too. He stared at the stove, the pots and pans and the tin dishes in open fascination.

"Ain't been on a campin' trip for some years," he murmured. "Never was on one with a fussy outfit like this. Mighty—"

"Listen careful," MacLoyd said with unnecessary distinctness. "My nerves is all shot from hard work, so I'm takin' a vacation. I want peace and quiet, so I'm goin' where there ain't nobody. I ain't takin' yuh along, for I don't aim to have no fat ole goat around to fuss with. I ain't ever tellin' yuh where I'm goin'! Just me myself an' nobody else except a feller I got hired to do the work, and a team and a wagon is goin'. Understand?"

"Shore," Doc grinned. "I ain't invited."

MacLoyd spat again. He got a bumblebee this time.

"Exactly! Yuh got the idea the first time!"

Doc kept on grinning, but inwardly he felt a stir of anger. Not that he particularly wanted to go camping with the sheriff, but Doc didn't like the idea of being left out of anything.

"Also," MacLoyd went on acidly, "don't get no ideas into yore thick head about swappin' me outa this stuff. It's mine, an' I'm a-keepin' it. Not only will I use it this year, but I'll use it in the years to come. Savvy?"

Doc stiffened slightly. He hadn't got around to thinking about trying to swap the sheriff out of the camping equipment. Now, he felt a stir of excitement. Anything MacLoyd owned, Doc always wanted. Besides, getting into a rip-roaring swap with the bony old sheriff was something that Doc never passed up.

"Wouldn't be bothered with a lot of fancy stuff like this," he murmured. "Couldn't give it to me. Howsomever, I got two nice heifers—"

A dangerous light leaped into MacLoyd's pale eyes.

"Doc," he clipped, "yuh've said enough! Turn yore fat carcass around and skedaddle!"

"Now, looky," Doc sputtered, "that ain't no way to—"

"Git!" MacLoyd roared. "I don't wanta hear a—"

The back door of the jail opened, and Ham Brady stepped out into the sunshine. Ham was MacLoyd's occasional deputy. When he wasn't acting as deputy, he trapped in winters and loafed in summers. At all times, night and day, he wore a squirrel skin cap over his shaggy hair.

"Sheriff," he said, "Pee-wee Miller has

gone for the grub. Oh, hello, Doc."

DOC ignored Ham's greeting. He had his fancy Stetson in one hand and a red bandana in the other. He made an angry swipe across his gleaming bald head.

"Them heifers," he said, "is right nice stock. Mebbe—"

"For the last time," MacLoyd bellowed, "no! And good-by! Come around in a couple of weeks, and I'll tell yuh about the fish I caught. Till then, adios!"

Ham Brady pawed the tail of his cap out of his eyes.

"Doc," he grinned. "why don't yuh give up and go home?"

That was too much for Doc. He snorted like a sod-pawing bull. He slammed his fancy hat over his head so hard it went down past his ears. Mumbling some choice cusswords, he stamped around the corner of the jail and on down the street. Thinking back, he couldn't remember the time when he'd been so riled. He felt plumb insulted. Thinking ahead, he resolved he'd own the sheriff's new camping outfit if it was the last thing he ever did.

"Who's he think he is?" he snarled. "Not invitin' an ole friend of forty years to go with him. Not even tellin' me where he's goin'. Refusin' to talk swap! The blasted ole—"

That was when he saw Pee-wee Miller, and the wheels in his head took a couple of turns. Pee-wee was coming out of Jeff Weber's general store and he carried a box of groceries almost as large as he. Pee-wee had done a lot of cooking for ranches and such in days gone by. It suddenly occurred to Doc that Pee-wee might be MacLoyd's hired man. Doc hid the scowl behind an innocent smile as Pee-wee approached.

"Looks like yuh and the sheriff are really goin' to eat on yore campin' trip over to East Jackson," Doc murmured.

"Ain't goin' to East Jackson," Pee-wee returned. "Goin' up to Sugar Lake."

Pee-wee set down his box and squared off for a gab-fest. Nothing the runty little cook liked better than to visit. Give him someone to talk to, especially about the Civil War, and everything else could go hang. But Doc had other things on his mind besides gabbing. He had a mighty big problem—how to swap MacLoyd out of his new camping outfit. And get a two weeks' vacation to boot! Besides, Doc had learned all he wanted to know from Pee-wee, so he hurried on to his neat white cottage at the edge of town.

Whenever Doc Swap had a problem to solve, he went to Sugar Valley on a swapping spree. Nesters were settling up the valley, and nesters were traders. Swapping sharpened Doc's mind; helped him work things out. And, too, Sugar Valley lay between Dry Bluffs and Sugar Lake. Still scowling, he hooked his team of fat, sleek bays to the old covered wagon in which he carried his swappin' goods. He was still as put-out as an old hen that had been booted into an irrigation ditch.

Usually Doc lived off the country when he went swapping, but this time, since he expected to be gone for some time, he loaded up some flour, coffee and sugar. However, he didn't bother to take along any of his swappin' goods.

By the time he climbed up on the sagging spring seat of the old covered wagon and headed into the one street, it was mid-morning. A half-mile ahead, moving toward the Sugar Creek Trail, was a loaded lumber wagon. Doc's scowl deepened. Sheriff MacLoyd and Pee-wee Miller were on their way to the lake with the camping equipment.

"The hard-headed, star-totin' ole cuss!" Doc muttered. "I'll get even with him someway!"

How, he hadn't the slightest idea.

Doc made his first stop at Loop and Puney Porter's place. Things were really happening there. Loop and Puney had Indian Joe Charley backed up against a rail fence and were laying the law down to him. The old Indian's buxom squaw stood nearby, holding the reins of a skinny pack horse.

Loop put a bony finger against Indian Joe's chest and roared, "So yuh can't return the steer 'cause yuh et it. And yuh ain't got ten dollars to pay for it. So I say yuh're gonna work it out on our farm, or else!"

"Absolutely!" Puney agreed. "Pay up, or go to work!"

INDIAN JOE CHARLEY looked about unhappily.

"Me very busy—" he began. Then he saw Doc. "Doc Swapum a very smart

fixer-upper," he said hopefully. "Doc, tellum Loop and Puney how to fixum up ten dollar debt so's I won't have to do no farm work."

Doc whipped off his fancy Stetson and scratched his head thoughtfully. Suddenly the light broke. Doc knew the answer to his problem right then, and a wide grin spread across his round face.

"Why," he said, "I'll assume the debt myself and pay it in a few days. In the meantime, Joe and his wife will go with me on a little campin' trip."

The old Indian grinned happily.

"Indian Joe a mighty fine camper-outer," he declared.

Pleased looks came to Loop and Puney Porter's wind-burned faces. They knew that Doc's word was as good as gold.

"Just for that," Puney said, "we got a couple of ole settin' hens we'll give yuh if yuh want 'em."

Doc never turned anything down that was edible or had a possible swapping value. He took the two hens.

"Got yore farm work about done for the season?" he asked.

The Porters nodded.

"You boys deserve a little vacation," Doc went on blandly. "Ever think about goin' up to Sugar Lake to do some fishin'? Mighty restful up there. Cool, too."

"Why," Puney muttered, "that might be kinda fun."

"Sounds good," Loop admitted. "Mebbe we had oughta do that, Doc. In fact, I think we will."

"A feller never lives but once," Doc said impressively.

A few minutes later, the old swapper, Indian Joe Charley, his squaw and the old pack horse were jogging on along the trail. When they came to a side road that led to Ike Johnson's homestead, Doc pulled his bays to a halt.

"Joe," he said, "you and yore squaw go on to Sugar Lake. Pick out a nice campin' site and wait for me. Reckon I'll be along in a day or two."

"Indian Joe glad to do anything for a fine gentleman like Doc Swapum," the old Indian said solemnly.

Joe Charley and his squaw headed on up the trail. Doc drove to Ike Johnson's, a big smile showing through his ragged white whiskers. Going on a swapping spree, he reckoned, sure sharpened a man's mind.

Ike Johnson stood with his lanky back against a sagging porch post, puffing unhappily at his blackened pipe. Millie, Ike's wife, stood in the yard, holding a hound by a rope leash. Millie looked mad enough to bite a hind leg off the dog.

Doc slid from the wagon and beamed like a ray of sunshine.

"Mighty purty mornin'," he observed.

Millie snorted, making the hound tremble. "Ike's dog just got through killin' my ole settin' hen," she snapped. "Now, I'm goin' to learn this dog a thing or—"

"Speakin' of settin' hens," Doc murmured, "got a nice one in my wagon. Figured on raisin' some chickens, but—"

That was when Millie started talking swap.

"Don't want to let them eggs spoil," she said.

Eventually Doc parted with the setting hen. In exchange he got several yards of mosquito netting, three cans of cherries, a bushel of potatoes, a rake with a broken handle, and the hound to boot.

"Millie," Doc said as he loaded his loot into the wagon, "yuh got a mighty tired look about yore eyes. What you and the kids need is a nice vacation."

"I know it," Millie agreed, "but somebody's got to stay to home an' look after things. Besides, we can't afford—"

"Wouldn't cost nothin' for yuh an' the kids to go up to Sugar Lake an' camp a few days," Doc said innocently. "Of course, yuh couldn't talk Ike into stayin' here an' lookin' after things, but—"

"Couldn't I?" Millie's eyes narrowed. "Ike does what I tell him to do. If I say for him to stay at home, he—Doc, I believe the kids and me would enjoy a vacation."

"Reckon I'd better be goin'," Doc murmured. "Have a nice time, Millie."

He climbed up to the sagging spring seat, shook out the lines and drove away. He knew that Ike was in for a spell of batching. No mistake about that.

BY CUTTING across the open prairie, it wasn't far to Dog-ears Dover's ramshackle place. Dog-ears, an old bachelor from Missouri, stood in the doorway of his shack, wiggling his bare toes and watching Doc drive up. His twenty-odd

dogs sat about, also watching. When Doc pulled his team to a stop, the dogs set up a clamor that could be heard for miles.

Dog-ears sucked in a deep breath, and bellowed, "Shad-up, yo' all!"

Immediately the dogs became quiet. All except the dog which Doc had gotten from Millie Johnson.

Dog-ears shambled forward and eyed the dog with interest.

"Wouldn't mind havin' another dawg," he mumbled.

"Yuh can't have this'n," Doc said stubbornly.

Hearing that, Dog-ears became as contrary as a Missouri mule. He declared he was going to have the hound, and that was that.

After a long-winded wrangle, Doc gave in. For the hound, he got a saddle blanket, a broken down washing machine which Dog-ears had picked up at an auction sale, an empty stone jug, and his dinner to boot. Although Dog-ears was far from being a good cook, Doc wouldn't have dreamed of passing up a chance to eat. Especially when the meal was boot.

As they ate, Doc said, "I hear tell the huntin' is right good up around Sugar Lake. Of course, that's too far for yuh to take all yore dogs."

"Ain't no such thing," Dog-ears declared contrarily. "In fact, I was thinkin' some about goin' up there."

"Yuh better stay at home," Doc advised. "If them dogs should run acrost a bear, they'd be so scared they'd—"

"Them dawgs ain't afraid of no bar," Dog-ears defended hotly. "Reckon I'll start for the lake this afternoon. Been wantin' to run down a bar for some time."

Doc shoved back from the table. Inwardly he was smiling. Outwardly he looked doubtful.

"I'm goin' up that a-way myself in a day or so," he murmured. "But I probably won't see nothin' of yuh."

"Yo'll see me if yo' look around," Dog-ears retorted.

That afternoon, Doc saw a canvas-covered spring-wagon pulled by a sway-back horse coming his way. The driver, Purkey, the Picture Man, pulled his outfit to a stop beside Doc. Purkey went about from house to house with his camera, taking pictures. Usually he looked cheerful, but at the moment he seemed about ready to break down and cry.

"Bust yore camera?" Doc asked.

"Might as well bust it," Purkey growled. "Business is pos-i-tively no good. Ain't took no pictures for a week."

"Reckon I could give yuh a tip that'd bring yuh some business if yuh wanted me to," Doc said.

"I reckon I want yuh to," Purkey declared. "In fact, for a good tip, I'll give yuh two picture jobs. Free!"

"It's a deal," Doc smiled. "I understand that a lot of folks're takin' their vacation at Sugar Lake. Vacationers always like to have their pictures took."

Purkey's eyes lit up.

"Doc, here's where I head for Sugar Lake, pronto. But first, I'll take them two free pictures of yuh."

"I'm on my way to Sugar Lake, too," Doc told him. "I'll have yuh take them pictures up there."

Smiling happily, Purkey the Picture Man drove away as fast as his old sway-back horse would go. A satisfied expression was on his round, pink face, Doc turned into a weed-choked trail that led toward Sugar Creek and to Dad Blamit's hillside cabin.

His long white beard flying, Dad Blamit stood in the center of his vegetable garden, his bleary eyes fixed sadly on the rough, cloddy ground. Hearing the creak of Doc's covered wagon, he turned with a groan. Dad Blamit had a perpetual backache.

"Doc," he moaned, "roomatics is a-killin' me. Rabbits are eatin' my carrots. Throwed my rake at a dad-blamed cottontail and busted out the teeth. Ground full of clods, and—"

Doc had lifted up the rake with the broken handle.

"Yuh could put the handle of yore toothless rake in this'n," he murmured, "And be all fixed up, I reckon."

FOR THE moment, Dad Blamit forgot his backache. He even smiled above his waving beard.

"Doc, yuh're the dad-blamedest jasper to allus have what a body needs. I'll give yuh fifty cents for—"

Doc shook his head. He was a swapper, not a seller. Money he considered merely

an occasionally necessary nuisance.

"Wouldn't sell it," he said, "but might do some swappin'."

For the rake, Doc got a heaping basket of cabbages, onions, carrots and tomatoes. For boot, Dad Blamit parted with a large iron kettle.

Doc climbed into his wagon.

"Too bad about yore roomatics," he said sympathetically. "If I had 'em I'd go up to Sugar Lake for a week an take a good rest. But I reckon yuh're too ole and feeble to even think about goin' there."

Dad Blamit's bleary eyes flared.

"Who's ole and feeble?" he snapped. "I can go to the lake anytime I've a dad-blamed mind to!"

"Now, Dad," Doc protested, "don't yuh get no fool idea in yore head about spendin' a few days at the lake. Yuh stay right here where nothin' can happen to yuh, and—"

Dad Blamit swore fiercely.

"Ain't no dad-blamed busy-body can tell me what not to do! I'm goin' up to the lake, and yuh can go hang! I'll roll up a dad-blamed blanket and pack me some grub and—"

Doc drove away. When he glanced back, he saw the old gardener, his beard standing on end, scurrying toward the pole corral where he kept his one horse.

Doc made his next stop at the old Tinder Place where a loose-jointed, young hombre by the name of "Puzz" Piggley lived. Puzz got his name from the fact that he did little except work puzzles. Picture puzzles, wire puzzles, wooden puzzles, word puzzles—any kind of puzzles.

When Doc looked in through the open door of the old Tinder house, he saw the young man stretched out in the middle of the bare floor, a frown on his lean face, his red-rimmed eyes fixed on a jumble of wooden blocks.

"Doc," Puzz wailed, "I'm a-losin' my touch. To save my soul, I can't get these blocks to fit so's they'll make a ball like they're supposed to. Been workin' on it for a week."

"The trouble is," Doc said sagely, "yuh've over-trained yoreself. Yuh're like a boxer what's got muscle-bound."

Puzz frowned deeply. "Doc, mebbe yuh're right. But how is a man to make hisself un-muscle-bound?"

"Take a vacation," Doc said. "Go some'ers, mebbe to Sugar Lake, for a week and forget puzzles. When yuh come back, yuh'll likely put that puzzle together lickety-split."

Puzz got up on his long legs. He held out a big hand and shook Doc's pudgy hand warmly.

"Doc," he allowed, "yo're no doubt one of the smartest men in seven states. Just for helpin' me out, I'm goin' to give yuh this box of picture puzzles what I've worked till I can do 'em backwards and sideways."

Doc took the box and departed. Not that he intended to work any puzzles, but he never turned down anything which he might add to his collection of swapping goods.

As evening approached, Doc headed his team toward his favorite camping spot on the right bank of Sugar Creek. As he jolted along, he took inventory. Starting with nothing, he now had one setting hen, several yards of mosquito netting, three cans of cherries, a bushel of potatoes, a saddle blanket, an old washing machine, a stone jug, the promise of two free pictures, cabbages, onions, carrots, tomatoes, an iron kettle, and a box of puzzles. Too, he'd had his dinner. And he had the undying gratitude of Indian Joe Charley.

But Doc owed Loop and Puney Porter ten dollars. That worried him a trifle. After all, his scheme might fail, and in that case, he'd have to dig up the ten dollars. But remembering Sheriff MacLoyd's desire for two weeks of peace and quiet, Doc began to whistle in spite of his worry.

THE sounds of voices coming from the direction of the creek cut his whistling short. When he came in view of the camp site, he saw six young men sitting in a circle. They wore fancy dude-cowboy outfits, and lying about was an assortment of musical instruments, including a washboard. These hombres, Doc decided immediately, made up an aggregation known as the Junction Hot-shots, who played for dances up and down the valley.

Ignoring them, Doc made his camp nearby on the windward side. After filling the iron kettle partly full of water, he

built a fire under it and began to toss onions, cabbages, carrots and tomatoes into the water. Soon the savory odors were floating in the air about the Junction Hot-shots.

The leader, a tall, gangly hombre with flaming red hair, strolled over to where Doc squatted by the fire, stirring the contents of the bubbling kettle.

"Smells powerful good," he observed. "Whatta yuh call it?"

"Indian stew," Doc answered. " 'Course, I ain't got no rattlesnake meat to put in it. But a hunk of ordinary meat would do as well."

"We got some beef," the red-head offered hopefully.

"Might work us up a deal," Doc murmured. "Yuh furnish a hunk of beef, an' I'll furnish the rest, includin' the know-how of cookin'. We'll all eat—but I'd have to have a little somethin' extra for all my trouble."

The red-head held a conference with his men, while the smells grew more and more appetizing. The six of them came straggling to Doc's camp. Five of them carried their instruments and the washboard. The red-head carried a sizeable slab of beef.

Doc and the Hot-shots came to terms. For the meal and Doc's expert cooking, they were to dig into their own supplies and give the old swapper eggs, bacon, a jug of maple syrup and an assortment of canned goods. Also, when Doc learned that they had come to Sugar Creek to fish, he wrangled them out of some fishing tackle. That was his boot.

"Yuh boys won't catch no fish here worth mentionin'," he advised. "What yuh oughta do is go up to Sugar Lake."

The boys were interested. Carefully Doc gave them directions for finding the lake.

"Understand there's quite a number of people up there," he added. "Reckon yuh could stir up quite a crowd to listen to yuh play if yuh was a-mind to."

"We're kinda up a tree, Doc," the red-head said sadly. "Yuh see, I'm a jug player, and my jug got busted. The boys don't keep together so good when I ain't honkin' it out."

Doc went over to his covered wagon and fished out the stone jug he'd gotten

[*Turn page*]

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from Dog-ears Dover. The red-head's blue eyes began to sparkle.

"Sell me that jug, Doc, an' we'll all be fixed up."

"Wouldn't think of sellin' it," Doc said unhappily. "Howsomever, if yuh would want to do a little swappin'—"

The red-head wanted the jug. Bad. Willingly he parted with a pair of spurs and a bright red shirt to boot.

After all the stew had been cleaned up slick, the Hot-shots sat about the dying campfire, tuned up their instruments and began to play. In his day, Doc Swap had heard a lot of bad music, but that which the Hot-shots turned out made him wish he had two wads of cotton to stuff into his ears.

However, he applauded bravely after each number and declared that the boys would make a great hit with the vacationists at Sugar Lake. For this praise, the boys were grateful; and the red-head allowed that Doc, besides being the best cook this side of the Mississippi, had a real taste for music.

At last, they shook hands warmly all around, and the Hot-shots trooped back to their own camp. Doc gave a shuddering sigh of relief and vowed that he would break camp early in the morning to get away before the boys got around to playing any more tunes. Doc kept his vow.

The sun was less than two hours in the sky when the old swapper pulled his team of bays to a halt in front of the Zoop house. As usual, Rebecca Zenobia, the Zoop's six year old offspring, very spoiled, was raising the roof. Themistocles Whetstone Zoop, a brow-beaten little man, stood at one side, wringing his hands. Mrs. Zoop, her thin, bony face dripping with worry and unhappiness, was trying to quiet the child.

SMILING happily, Doc waddled into the house with the box of picture puzzles under one arm.

"Now, Rebecca Zenobia," Mrs. Zoop soothed, "don't be like your Pa. Be nice and dignified like me."

"Waaaa!" Rebecca Zenobia howled.

"Kids always like pictures," Doc shouted above the din.

He opened the box and let some of the picture puzzles flutter to the floor. The

girl stopped wailing and began to pick them up. She even smiled up at Doc.

"What'll yuh take for them things?" Mr. Zoop demanded.

Doc wouldn't take anything for them. But he would trade. For the box of puzzles, he got a blanket, a fair tarpaulin, two friers, and a gallon of lard to boot.

"Yuh know," Doc said as he turned to leave, "yuh should ought to take Rebecca Zenobia some'ers on a vacation. Don't seem to me she cries as loud as she used to. I reckon she's kinda run-down."

Mrs. Zoop's thin face suddenly looked worried.

"Been wantin' to go away for a few days," Themistocles said. "I'd like to go where it's quiet and peaceful."

"Everybody I've talked to lately is goin' to Sugar Lake," Doc said carelessly.

"Hadn't thought about going there," Mrs. Zoop admitted. "Personally, I like to go where there's plenty going on."

"Sugar Lake's the place for yuh, then," Doc told her. "Plenty goin' on there. Music. Picnics. Fishin'. That place has turned into a regular vacation resort."

"I wouldn't want to go there," Themistocles protested weakly. "I want to go where it's quiet and—"

"That's exactly where we'll go—Sugar Lake," Mrs. Zoop decided. "If we hurry, we can be on our way by noon. The hired man can look after things, and—"

Doc made a hurried exit, climbed up into his wagon and drove on along the trail. Remembering that Sheriff MacLoyd couldn't stand kids who kicked up a fuss, the old swapper felt like singing. However, he whistled softly between his teeth and let it go at that.

An hour later, he drove up to Mule and Ida Turners' place. Here he found the entire Turner family looking depressed.

"It's this a-way," Mule explained, pulling at one big ear, "today is me an' Ida's thirteenth weddin' anniversary. Allus before we had a pitchur took on these here occasions. But this year, Purkey the Pitchur Man has plumb forgot us. Besides, we're kinda short of cash and couldn't likely hire him to take a pitchur no-how."

"Sure hate to have to miss gettin' it took," Ida wailed.

[*Turn page*]

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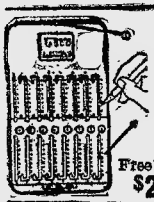

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"Sure do," the five little Turners echoed.

Doc whipped off his fancy hat and smiled kindly.

"Reckon I can fix that," he offered, "providin' yuh'll go up to Sugar Lake. Purkey's up there, and he owes me a free picture, which I'll swap off, mebbe."

The Turners were more than agreeable. When Doc left, they were preparing to go to Sugar Lake. All seven of them. For the free picture, Doc had a ham, a fair ax, a bushel of apples, and a box of old books to boot. Not that he was much of a hand to read, but it's nice, he reckoned, to have something along to read when a feller expects to spend two weeks camping out.

Doc made the last stop of his swappin' spree at Homer Prutt's bachelor quarters. All his life, Homer had been trying to invent something. So far, he'd failed. Now, he sat in the shade of his lean-to workshop, his pointed chin cupped in his bony hands, his red-rimmed eyes filled with a great sadness.

"Doc," he moaned, "reckon I'm a plumb failure. My new perpetual-motion machine won't run a-tall."

"Homer," Doc said in a fatherly way, "what yuh need is a change of scenery. Also, yuh need the gear wheels off this ole washing machine. An inventor can never have too many wheels."

Homer loved wheels. Too, he was interested in Doc's change of scenery idea. For the old washing machine, Doc got a worn-out usable saddle, a can of waterproofing paint and three ripe watermellons. When Doc drove away from Homer's workshop, the inventor was getting ready to go to Sugar Lake for a change of scenery.

Old Doc Swap arrived at Sugar Lake in the middle of the following morning. He pulled his bays to a stop at the crest of a low hill and studied the scene below with interest. The lake lay before him as blue and peaceful and quiet as the windless sky overhead. But that was as far as peace and quiet reined. On the shore there arose a great hubbub of activity.

A HORDE of children were yelling their heads off, playing "cowboy and Indian." Loop and Puney Porter

were arguing angrily over who should wash the dishes. Rebecca Zenobia Zoop was having one of her tantrums. Dog-ears Dover's twenty-odd dogs had a squirrel up a tree and were telling the world about it. Old Dad Blamit and Pee-wee Miller, MacLoyd's cook and helper, were having a hot argument over who won the Civil War. The Junction Hot-shots under the jug-tooting leadership of the gangly red-head were tuned-up and going to town on "Old Zip Coon." The Turners and Millie Johnson and Homer Prutt were trying to square-dance to the uncertain music.

Nothing Doc liked better than a lot of people around, all raising old ned. Grinning happily, he urged his bays forward. He stopped for a moment at Indian Joe Charley's wigwam and gave the old Indian final instructions. Then he drove straight to Sheriff MacLoyd's new green tent.

The sheriff stood in the shade. His pale eyes had a wild gleam in them, and his homely, bony face held kind of a greenish cast. When he saw Doc, he began to run his long fingers through his stand-uppish gray hair and cuss. He reminded Doc of a caged grizzly bear.

"I come here for two weeks of peace and quiet," he said, his voice rising to a scream, "and what happens? The whole dad-blasted valley moves in on me! Kids! Dogs! Gee-tar players! Banjo plunkers! Jug-honkin'—"

"Now, sheriff," Doc said soothingly, "take it easy. Remember yuh've come here to rest, not to rant like a loco steer."

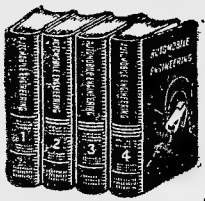
"Rest!" MacLoyd bellowed. "There ain't no such thing! Can't even get any work outa my cook. All he does is chase around and argue and talk. Can't eat. Can't sleep. Can't—"

"Mebbe what yuh need to do is to go to some out-of-the-way place," Doc suggested kindly. "Like up into the Sugar Hump mountains. Get yoreself a good Indian guide and—"

At that moment, Indian Joe Charley stepped around the side of the sheriff's fancy tent.

"Me and my squaw can takum sheriff to quiet place in mountains," Indian Joe

[*Turn page*]



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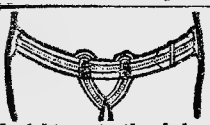

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said solemnly. "Very lonely place. No peoples. No road. Only trail for packhorse. Mebbe couldn't take fancy campin' outfit. Have to travel light. But plenty fish and quiet. Payum Joe ten dollars, and he showum way."

Nearby the Junction Hot-shots let out with a blast that had a faint resemblance to "Camptown Races."

"If I had some light campin' gear," MacLoyd bellowed above the noise, "I'd start this very minute!"

"Got just what yuh need," Doc spoke up. "Mosquito nettin'. A tarpaulin and water-proof paint to put on it. Blanket. Saddle and spurs so's yuh could go hoss back. Indian Joe could ride yore other hoss. His squaw could bring up yore stuff on the pack hoss. Yuh could leave yore wagon some'ers and pick it up on yore way home. Why, it looks like yuh're all set, sheriff."

Deep suspicion began to fill MacLoyd's bony face. Just as he opened his mouth to speak, Dog-ears Dover's hounds found another squirrel. Loop and Puney Porter began throwing tin dishes at each other. The Hot-shots gave up on "Camptown Races" and went back to "Old Zip Coon."

MacLoyd forgot his rising suspicions.

"Doc," he asked hoarsely, "how much'll yuh take—"

"Wouldn't want to sell," Doc said. "Howsomever, we might work out some kind of a swap."

TWO WEEKS later, old Doc Swap and Pee-wee Miller returned to Dry Bluffs in Doc's covered wagon. Pee-wee had served as Doc's cook and helper for the fancy red shirt and his meals. The food, most of which Doc had picked up by swapping, supplemented by fish caught in the lake, had fed both of them mighty well. In fact, Doc had lived like a king those two weeks in MacLoyd's green tent, which the sheriff had swapped to him along with the stove, mattress and tin dishes.

Noting that the sheriff's wagon and team stood tied to the hitchrail in front of the jail, Doc pulled his bays to a stop.

"Looks like MacLoyd's just got back," he observed. "Hold my horses, Pee-wee. Got a picture to show the ole bone-pile."

He slid stiffly to the ground and waddled into the sheriff's two-by-four office.

MacLoyd sat behind his desk. Seeing Doc, he frowned slightly, but said nothing.

Doc swept off his fancy hat and pulled a photograph from a pocket. It was one of the two free pictures taken by Purkey the Picture Man. It showed Doc standing in front of the green tent, a long string of fish in one hand, a large slice of watermelon in the other. Doc himself looked the image of contentment. Grouped behind him were all the people who had gone to the lake. They, too, looked content and happy.

"Them folks," Doc said blandly, "was shore mighty grateful to me because I'd talked 'em into takin' a vacation at Sugar Lake. They said they hadn't had so good a time since—"

The truth hit MacLoyd between the eyes. It staggered him, for he realized that once again Doc Swap had out maneuvered him. He swallowed half his cud and started to get to his feet. Then his knees sagged, and he sank back on his swivel chair and began to cuss hoarsely.

Grinning happily, Doc waddled back to his covered wagon. And to the lovely green tent and the fancy camping equipment. Next year, he reckoned, he'd take another vacation at Sugar Lake. Might even take Pee-wee Miller along so that they could continue their argument about who won the Civil War.

NEXT ISSUE'S HEADLINERS!

•

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A Jim Hatfield Novel

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•

DOC SWAP'S WEDDING GIFT

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THE BLIZZARD AND THE BANKER

(Concluded from page 85)

room seemed to rock with the roar of shots. The men around the stove had flung themselves flat on the floor. Loring fired two shots, and saw Dutch Schultz go down carrying table and chair over with him. He whirled about, but Jack Mundy needed no help. Ike Payson was slowly collapsing, had already dropped his gun.

Black Jack Mundy had backed to the middle of the room, but he still faced the bar. He was dripping blood onto the plank floor, from a wound in left side. His boyish face had turned stiff and ugly. He didn't look very drunk, now. Stace Wyland rose slowly from behind the bar, having dropped down when the shooting started. His face was gray.

Jack Mundy had holstered his .45. "Your turn now, Stace," he said. "You were in on it. I saw that signal you gave Payson and Schultz when the banker came. I wasn't blind-drunk!"

"You've got it wrong, Jack!" Wyland gasped. "Hold on, now—"

"He was in on it, Jack," Loring said. "I have Bonnie's word for it."

The outlaw said, "You've got a pocket gun, Wyland. I'm giving you a chance to grab for it. If you don't grab, I'll kill you anyway. Take your choice!"

Wyland looked wildly at Loring, saw no hope there. He reached inside his coat. Black Jack Mundy let him get the derringer all the way out before he drew his own gun. Even so, Stace Wyland wasn't fast enough. He jerked at the impact of Mundy's bullet, and crumpled to the floor. John Loring didn't stay to talk over the fight with the men who had witnessed it. He helped doctor Jack Mundy's wound, which turned out to be nothing more serious than torn flesh and broken ribs. Then the banker left the saloon and battled his way across the stormy street. He was in a hurry to get home to his rooms. They would not be cold since Bonnie Hanlon was there to watch the fire. Nor from then on would they be lonely.

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THE FRONTIER POST

(Continued from page 10)

source on Mount Olympus, where big sea-run cutthroats or harvest trout went loco over a bucktail Coachman well-cast in the swirling eddies beside an alder-hung bank. We came on Indian villages at the mouths of the rivers, where Quinalt Indians netted salmon from their dugout canoes, carved out of cedar logs. Silver smelt glittered on their spawning beaches and clams and oysters were there for the easy taking.

We loafed along but the days raced past on the well-greased wheels of Time and one day I caught Big John looking at a road map.

The Day of Reckoning

For once his good-humored face was sad.

"Well, pardner, the day of reckoning is at hand," he gloomed. "We've plenty overstayed already."

"Cheer up, there's another summer next year," I gulped back at him.

"And then Alaska, how about it?"

"Why not?"

So we tried to make ourselves feel good talking and planning about that, as we rolled south, back into the haunts of civilization.

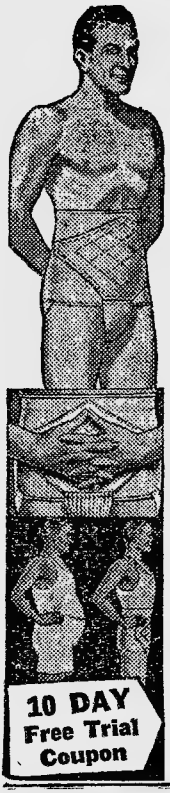
Anyhow, the warm sun of our Southwest would feel good after all those days in rain-shiny slickers in the eternal shade and drip of the big timber. A man can't have everything, not forever. And we were luckier than most. We had seen and done pretty much as Lewis & Clark had, more'n a century before when the evergreen Northwest was roamed only by redmen and an occasional hardy fur trapper. When Hudson's Bay Company was the only law in the land, instead of a big store bustling with people, like that one at Victoria.

When John Got Mad

What's that? You want to know about the time Big John clouded up and got mad? Well, I reckon he won't mind me telling. Because nothing much came of it. He didn't stay at the boiling point long enough to make things hot for the other fellow.

It happened two-three seasons back, when we were on another one of our darn-fool looksees in another region. Big John and I, we were on a steelhead river and he was

[*Turn page*]



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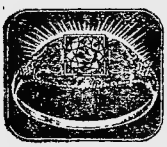

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wading deep, playing a fighting nine-pounder, when down-river roared a guide-boat with an unmannered hyena at the wheel, passing so close to Big John that the bow-wave nearly swamped him, over his high-topped waders.

The uncalled-for performance, as I recollect, also caused Big John to lose his fish.

He didn't say a word. He just reeled in and waded ashore. We knew where that guide-boat put in, a few miles below. I was all set for a real exciting show. I figured on Big John waiting grimly there at the landing when the smart-Aleck boatman came in. The boat hombre wasn't any midget, himself. He had hunted trouble and he deserved to find it in a hard 250-pound hunk.

Big John unbelted his waders and peeled them down to half-mast, sitting there on the running board of his car. We could make it down to the landing in a few minutes—well ahead of the boat. There were little spots of white where the muscles drew tight over the corners of his jaw.

Watch and Wait

I didn't do any talking, just watched and waited. Big John hoisted up one foot, then the other, thoughtfully spilling water out of his waders. Then he stood up and pulled 'em back on.

He was wearing that sunny grin again.

"Let's go fishin'," he laughed, reaching for his rod and starting down to the river after another nine-pounder.

Maybe it's lucky for some folks that big men are good-natured, most usually. But I did hanker to see that boat hombre get a schooling in etiquette. He wore a big Ranger-size Stetson and I'd figured on seeing it float down-river while he was trying to untangle his arms and legs and get back in shape to stand up. For about 20 years, Big John had been a football coach. He could smack an average man cold with his middle finger.

Well, gals and galluses, there wasn't much cow-country in this Canada pasear, was there? It took us to parts out West where hombres wear calked boots instead of spurs and swing axes instead of lariats. After all, the frontier breed is made up of more than one species.

But we'll get back into our own bailiwick at next get-together of this Frontier Post in TEXAS RANGERS Magazine. See you then

—and now, let's just read on and see what the editor has to say.

—CAPTAIN STARR.

NEXT MONTH'S ISSUE

HERE rides the Lone Wolf, there goes adventure, high and bright and golden. Every Jim Hatfield fan knows that, and when you have finished reading CRIMSON VENGEANCE in the next issue of TEXAS RANGERS you'll be more sure of it than ever. Could be that in this particular case we should say "silvery" instead of golden, because mercury—a great mine of it and a clear, shimmering pool of it—is the force that moves the characters in this great Jackson Cole novel of the old West.

Mercury, you know, is quicksilver, and it lives up to its name. It is immensely valuable to the arts and to industry. It is also fast, treacherous and poisonous. And, because of its value, it sometimes attracts men who are also fast, treacherous and poisonous—as in CRIMSON VENGEANCE.

Smoke rose from the retorts of the huge Terlinga quicksilver mine, down in Texas. It rose and spread, shadowing the beauty of the day and of the land with a threat of disaster and death. Its long streamers like striking spear points thrust out threateningly toward the quiet ranchhouses and the grazing herds.

Jim Hatfield, sitting his great Goldy horse on a hilltop and looking down at it, spoke thoughtfully to the animal.

"Yes, I've a notion the devil has looked down there of late, judging from what we were told of this section," he said.

But Hatfield didn't know the half of it—then. The devil and most of his imps were there, and busy. But there was more in the situation than ugly scheming. There was weirdness and mystery and the terrific anger of a people whose gods have been offended and insulted by outsiders.

For in the mountains at the site of the great mine was a pool of pure quicksilver, and this, to the Indians, was the home and the altar to The Shining God. They paid honor at this shrine, and their fires—burning the cinnebar ore from which comes quicksilver—made regular tribute of more mercury to the pool. Woe betide the human so brash as to affront The Shining God!

[*Turn page*]

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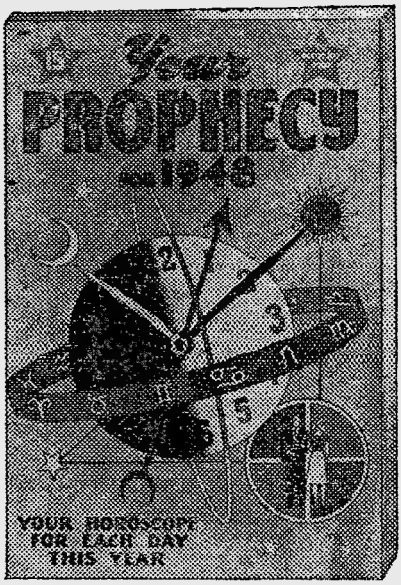

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In the evening, Hatfield rode into the town of Terlinga—a town which roared to the sun and howled to the stars. Terlinga was tough—but so was Terlinga's new mayor, Chandler Grant, who ran the saloon called the "Peaceful Rest." Hmmm! Peaceful Rest! You could call Boot Hill that, too, huh? But the stableman told Hatfield that the saloon served meals, too, so the Lone Wolf legged it there.

Chandler Grant was there, and Grant was a slender, elegant man, handsome, smiling dressed in immaculate black relieved only by the snow of his ruffled shirt front. His eyes were light blue, the cold blue of a glacier lake. He watched Hatfield while the big Ranger ate, but said nothing to him.

But, a little later, as Hatfield sat over a cigarette and final cup of coffee, he saw Chandler Grant in action! Some half drunken cowboys at a nearby poker table had started a ruckus, and one of them pulled a gun. Grant had the gun wrist at once in a grip so terrible that the cowboy howled with the pain, became a good lad pronto.

"You know I won't stand for gunplay in my establishment," Grant said in musical, unruffled tones. "Besides, a few gold pieces aren't worth killing a man over."

He picked up one of the broad twenty-dollar coins, turned it over in his white fingers. The slim fingers tensed suddenly, a blue vein stood out on Grant's white forehead. He laid the double eagle back beside its fellows on the table. The card players stared.

The coin was bent almost at right angles!

Jim Hatfield whistled under his breath.

"What a pair of hands," he muttered. "Rods of nickel steel, those fingers!"

One of the card players let out an injured wail. "By gosh, Chan, that's my pot!" he exclaimed with humorous seriousness. "Now look what yuh've went and done. You've plumb sp'iled one of my twenty-peso chunks!"

Chan Grant smiled, and called to his big bouncer, who was hovering nearby.

"Russ," he said, "get a hammer and straighten it out for the gent. He doesn't like 'em bent."

Jim Hatfield, a faint smile quirking the corners of his mouth, rose to his feet and strolled to the table.

"No sense in hunting for a hammer," he observed, picking up the misshaped coin. His slender hands tensed a moment. The sleeves

ot his shirt swelled to the bursting point as great muscles leaped out on arm and shoulder. He dropped the coin back on the table. It fell with a musical clink and lay *perfectly flat!* With a nod to Chan Grant, Hatfield turned and strode from the saloon.

This time it was Chandler Grant who stared.

End of chapter! But, folks, we just dare you to read that far in CRIMSON VENGEANCE and then lay the magazine aside without finishing! Jim Hatfield, the tall, powerful Texas Ranger, and Chandler Grant, the slim, beautifully-dressed and manicured saloonkeeper had one quality in common: from heels to hatbrim they were *men!*

You don't judge a man by his size or by his clothes—nor always by what he does, because some mighty bad gents here and there have proved they had what it takes—and how! Chandler Grant, what was he? Never mind! Grant and a lot of other mighty effective hombres do their stuff in this story and—to you, reader—thrills are guaranteed.

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[*Turn page*]

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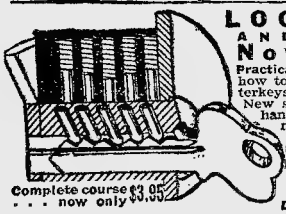

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I just want to tell you how much I like the Jim Hatfield stories. I read where one fan wanted a dog in the story. That's silly, because then Jim couldn't stalk anything. GULF GUNS was a real story.—*John Wesley Fults, Beechgrove, Tenn.*

I love western stories of all kinds, but I like TEXAS RANGERS best of all.—*Martha McGuire, Hot Springs, Ark.*

I have been a reader of your magazine for a long time, and think it tops.—*Alice Hewitt, Bouse, Arizona.*

For heaven's sake, leave the love out of the Jim Hatfield stories. Jim Hatfield is a Texas Ranger, he is sworn to do his duty. Women shouldn't enter the story. There would be too great risks for his wife if he had one.—*Doris Porter, Ravenna, Ohio.*

I have been reading TEXAS RANGERS for two years now. I have just finished reading THE KIOWA KILLER, which I think is swell.—*Ogden Case, Bristol, Tenn.*

Seems to me that the Jim Hatfield stories are the best in any western magazine. While living in Mexico I always secured a copy.—*James Hartley, Los Angeles, Calif.*

The November issue of TEXAS RANGERS was the first I ever read. I bought it, expecting to read it gradually for two weeks or so. But the stories held my attention so much that I finished the book last night. It is a regular from now on for me.—*Bill Charles, Cleveland, Ohio.*

If Jim Hatfield gets himself a girl, then where will he be? Jim is not the type to be fickle. But he probably would neglect his job shamefully and maybe wind up six feet under, if he got to thinking about a girl at the wrong time. However, Mr. Cole, I think you're doing a grand job, so keep it up.—*Martha Taylor, Berkeley, California.*

I have been a constant reader of your magazine for a long time, though in the Navy we could not always get it. But I, for one, will be following our mutual friend, Hatfield, on his tours of duty in the future.—*Robert W. Rupp, Ocean Springs, Miss.*

I agree with Carlton Carroll that you ought to have Jim Hatfield fall in love but not marry. Keep up the good stories.—*Marvin L. Hunt, Jackson, Miss.*

I have just finished reading LAW ON THE WESTERN RANGE, THE KIOWA KILLER AND GUNS OF THE YELLOW HILLS. Some people speak about Jim Hatfield being a fictitious character, but he seems too real for that.—*Diana Tabor, Sallison, Okla.*

At present I am in the Brunswick Hospital here. My wife brought me TEXAS RANGERS and I read Jim Hatfield and Doc Swap. Both were wonderful.—*Oscar King, Brunswick, Me.*

Leave Hatfield the way he is.—*Arnold Piske, Phoenix, Ariz.*

Jackson Cole is my favorite western writer.—*Essie Harless, Boswell, Okla.*

The Frontier Post is like an extra education, very pleasantly obtained.—*Mildred Loper, Elmira, N. Y.*

RODEO RAIDERS was super.—*Arthur Decker, Hillpoint, Wis.*

Just finished another Jim Hatfield novel and think it was very good.—*James F. Jimmo, Escumenac, N. B.*

I think Jim Hatfield should definitely not get married.—*Ted Greenfield, Viceroy, Sask., Canada.*

A lawman like Hatfield has no business with a wife—not till he retires, anyway.—*C. H. Brown, Hood River, Ore.*

I like Jim Hatfield single, but I think the stories would be more interesting if there were a girl in each. —*Mary Bridenstine, Ohio.*

I think TEXAS RANGERS is the best western magazine.—*Grace Wallace, New Liskeard, Ontario, Canada.*

And that'll be about all for this time, folks! Thanks everybody!

Was *your* letter among those we have received lately? If not, why not? We get so many letters that sometimes we haven't room to print them all, but we're always more than glad to hear from our readers, and every letter gets careful reading. Bouquets or brickbats, we like 'em all. Kindly address The Editor, TEXAS RANGERS, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y.

Hasta mañana.

—THE EDITOR

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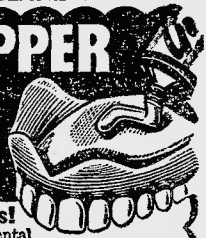

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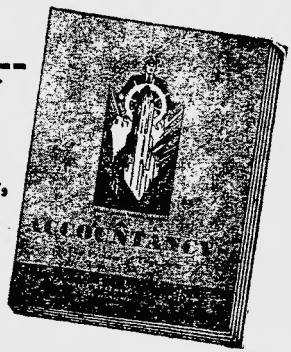

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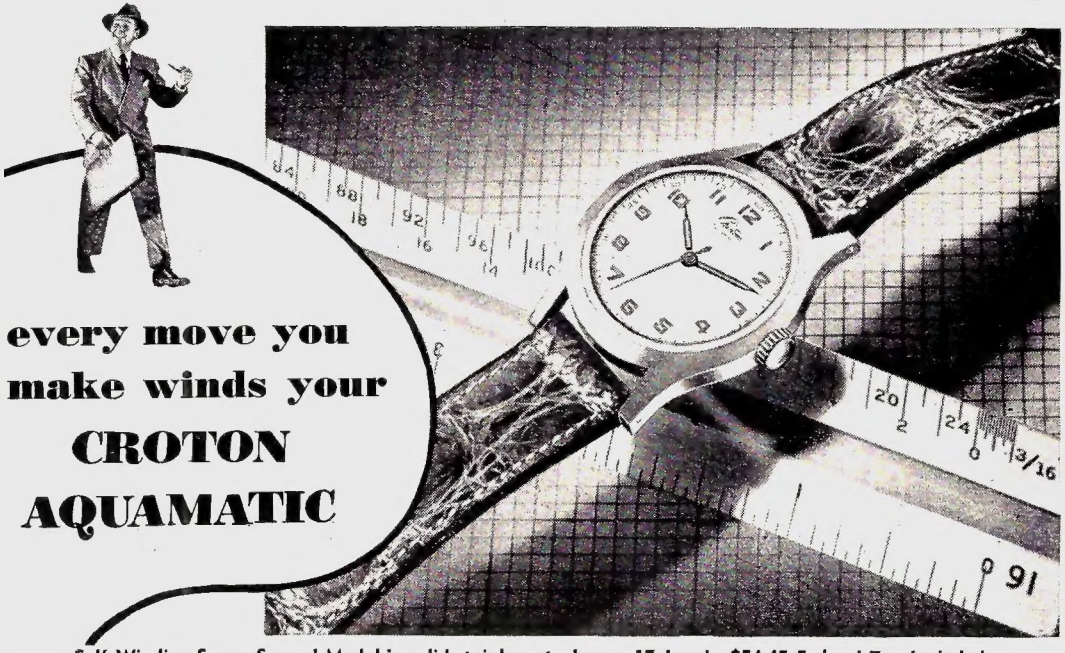

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IT'S NIGHT. You've just returned to camp with your "bag." You'll be shooting again tomorrow *but* . . . you know if you don't clean your gun *tonight*, it may become "pitted." Better have a flashlight handy to help. Better be sure your flashlight is powered with "Eveready" batteries . . . Powerful, dependable, *they outlast all other brands!**

PLACE A SMALL PIECE OF WHITE PAPER in the breech of your gun. Then direct the beam of your flashlight on the paper. *Now* you can see through the barrel clearly . . . to be sure the gun is thoroughly cleaned and ready for tomorrow's "shooting."

● Brighter light, longer life! That's what you want in a flashlight battery. And that's what you get with "Eveready" brand batteries. Laboratory tests prove it. And the best "laboratory" of all — *your own flashlight* — proves it! That's why "Eveready" batteries *outsell* all other brands — because they *outlast* all other brands!*

*According to the "General-Purpose 4-Ohm Intermittent Test" of the American Standards Association, which most closely approximates average use.

The registered trade-mark "Eveready" distinguishes products of

NATIONAL CARBON COMPANY, INC.
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Proof! . . . in the laboratory . . . in your own flashlight . .

"EVEREADY" BATTERIES OUTLAST ALL OTHER BRANDS!*